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Preview

Then the creature yowled, louder than any thunder, stronger than any current in the river, and scarier than any tale she'd ever heard from the elders.

But as soon as it had started, the yowling stopped and was replaced by a voice, a whisper compared to the creature's yowl. Echokit realized it was a cat, and a cat she had recently met: Whirlheart! But this time, when she spoke, it wasn't in the soft voice she had heard when she first met her, but a hollow, emotionless voice that spoke ominous words of a terrible prophecy.

"Darkness will veil the sky, but with the whispering voice of two, the forest, as one, will echo with light."

Echokit shuddered and everything went black.

Copyright

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This story is based on the *Warriors* world created by Erin Hunter. I do not own *Warriors*, but the names in the story are my own. Do not copy any parts of this story without permission.

Thank you, and enjoy reading!

Allegiances

DawnClan

Leader: ***Eveningstar***— large gray tom with tan flecks and a white underbelly

Deputy: ***Twigfoot***— dusty brown tom with pale green eyes

Medicine Cat: ***Goldheart***— vibrant orange tabby tom with light orange eyes

Warriors:

Aspenleaf— cream-furred she-cat with pale green eyes

Bronzepelt— dark red-orange tom with lighter muzzle and yellow eyes

*Apprentice: Echopaw

Copperleaf— orange-brown tom with darker brown muzzle and ears

Creekfall— pale silver tabby tom with gray-green eyes

Eaglefeather— long-haired dark brown- and black-furred tom with yellow eyes

Gravelpelt— dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

*Apprentice: Whisperpaw

Meadowheart— tortoiseshell and white she-cat with amber eyes

Prairiefoot— pale orange tabby tom with pale green eyes

Rustypelt— long-haired gray-brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Sparktail— red-brown she-cat with darker flecks, fluffy tail, and

brown eyes

Sparrowtail— brown tabby she-cat with thin black stripes and white underbelly

Sunfur— orange-brown she-cat with black flecks and long black-tipped tail

Twilightfoot— large black tom with white paws, underbelly, and muzzle

Apprentices:

Echopaw— mottled gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Whisperpaw— light gray tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Queens:

Moonshine— white she-cat with silver flecks and pale green eyes (mother of Twigfoot's kits: *Cloverkit*— black she-kit with green eyes, *Hailkit*— dark gray tom with a white underbelly and blue eyes, *Yellowkit*— light orange tabby she-kit with green eyes)

Sagetail— cream-furred she-cat with blue-gray eyes (mother of Bronzepelt's kit: *Raykit*— orange tabby tom-kit with orange eyes)

Elders:

Ferrettail— dark brown tom with bright green eyes

Fogtail— light gray she-cat with darker gray flecks and brown eyes

Spruceclaw— dark brown tom with lighter brown underbelly and yellow eyes

DayClan

Leader: ***Rainstar***— white she-cat with black patches and icy-blue eyes

Medicine Cat: ***Lilyfoot***— white she-cat with dark gray and light brown tabby patches

*Apprentice: Fernpaw

Apprentices:

Fernpaw— small white tom with a red and black tabby tail

DuskClan

Leader: ***Orangestar***— ginger- and white-patched tom with orange eyes

Medicine Cat: ***Crystalheart***— white she-cat with bright blue eyes

NightClan

Leader: ***Beechstar***— pale ginger tabby tom with teal eyes

Deputy: ***Mapleleaf***— ginger tom with dark orange eyes

Medicine Cat: ***Bushtail***— long-haired pale ginger tom with a fluffy tail

*Apprentice: Icepaw

Warriors:

Larksong— small dark brown tabby she-cat with black stripes

*Apprentice: Cliffpaw

Robintail— black tom with orange patches

*Apprentice: Pebblepaw

Swantail— long-haired white she-cat with a fluffy tail

Apprentices:

Cliffpaw— pale ginger she-cat with light blue eyes

Icepaw— pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Pebblepaw— black- and white-patched she-cat with a fluffy tail

Prologue

Moonlight shimmered on the surface of a pond, turning the water silver. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees, echoing across the cool, starry night. A stray leaf floated down through the air, carried on the breeze. It landed into the pond, which sent ripples across its surface, breaking the moon's perfect reflection. The grass around the water waved restlessly as the cool night air weaved around it.

Two cats lay in the cool grass, the wind sending chills through their bodies as it ruffled their fur. They both gazed up at the night sky, their eyes clouded with sadness. The first was a ginger she-cat, and the second was a dark gray tabby tom-cat. Both had stars glittering in their fur, reflecting on the surface of the pond.
Footsteps sounded behind them and they both turned around to find two more cats padding toward them: a silver tabby she-cat with white paws, and a pale brown tabby tom. They, like the first two cats, had stars in their fur, sending up of sparks of starlight every time they took a pawstep.

The ginger she-cat sat up and spoke to the newcomers, "So have you found anything, Whirlheart? Swampclaw? All the new Clans are in terrible risk of being destroyed. There is a danger coming upon the forest; I can sense it even if I can't see it."

"Yes, we have, Peachfur," Swampclaw replied, dipping his brown, starry head. "StarClan can only do so much to help them. I believe, that with the proper cats, this evil can be overcome..."

"Yes, that is possible, but which cats to choose? There are many loyal cats in all of the Clans," meowed Slatefur beside Peachfur, looking concerned. He then turned to the silver tabby she-cat with white paws. "What do you think, Whirlheart?" he asked her.

The starry silver she-cat blinked. "Well, after I sent each of you to your old Clans to keep an eye out for those that have the skill to lead the Clans through the dark times, I went to look in my own old

Clan," Whirlheart replied.

"And did you find any cat in DawnClan that would be strong enough to bear the weight of this prophecy and hold the fate of the Clans in their paws?" Swampclaw asked Whirlheart urgently.

"Yes," she replied slowly and nodded her head, as if convincing herself that she had found the right cats. "Two of them." She nodded at the pond, which had begun to swirl with the moving image of two small cats sleeping peacefully beside each other.

The other three starry cats glanced at the pond too, staring at the two small cats portrayed in the water.

"I have to agree," Swampclaw nodded, turning back to Whirlheart. "These two cats are very loyal and brave already. They have pure hearts and want the best for not only their Clan, but all the Clans, even if neither of them know it yet. Yes, these two are perfect."

"Shall I tell them then?" Whirlheart asked.
Swampclaw nodded. "Yes, I think that would be wise. But only when they are ready. It would be torture to tell them when they are still so young."

Whirlheart dipped her head and meowed, "I shall watch them then, and soon I'll tell them; but the longer we wait, the less prepared they will be when the danger does come."

Peachfur turned to Whirlheart, concern in her eyes. "How will you tell them? They're only kits! They wouldn't understand how important they are if you tell them so soon!"

Slatefur rounded on her. "We must tell them soon! The future of all the Clans, including StarClan, may rest in these two cats' choices, in these cats' paws! And anyway, loads of young cats learned things about destiny and choice when we were young warriors, did they not?" he hissed. "I was a young warrior, and I watched cats around me die; kits and apprentices watched our Clanmates die! You, Peachfur, out of us four, should remember what I'm talking about! You were a wise old elder at the time, weren't you? Wise enough to give Rain—"

Swampclaw shot between them and glared at Slatefur. "We have no room for argument among StarClan! Forget previous arguments between you and your old Clans! If we are divided, all of the Clans will perish!"

Peachfur glared mutinously at Slatefur, but she obeyed Swampclaw's demand and didn't argue further.

Slatefur sat up and dipped his head, "You're right, Swampclaw. But we need to tell these two cats soon; even if they are just kits, they may be the only thing that stands between the Clans being destroyed and the Clans surviving!"

Peachfur blinked. "Can we really rely that much on these two? Can we be sure that they'll make the right choices to protect the Clans? Saying that these two cats want the best for all four Clans, Whirlheart, is, in fact, only StarClan's guesswork."

"StarClan's knowledgeable guesswork," Slatefur intervened.

Swampclaw blinked. "It is true, what Peachfur says. We don't know for sure that these two will fulfill the prophecy, but we must trust in their choices and their hearts, because prophecies aren't final; they don't predict the future."

"Yes; destiny isn't set in the stars; rather it is a choice. One determines their own destiny. We can't set out these cats' destiny for them. But we can guide these two as they find their destiny. Besides that, we have to put our trust in them. That is all we can do," Whirlheart added.

Swampclaw nodded. "Whirlheart is correct. And we must trust that these two cats will find their hearts the courage to handle this knowledge and find the desire to save the Clans."

"I believe that they will. After all, they come from my Clan," Whirlheart purred.

Slatefur rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter which Clan they're from in the end. What matters is that they can put Clan differences aside and save all four Clans. That's why we sought them out."

Swampclaw nodded approvingly at him.
Peachfur spoke up and turned toward Whirlheart. "How are you going to tell them? It has to be well thought out, or else they may think it's just a dream they had by coincidence."

Whirlheart dipped her head. "I already know how I'm going to tell them."
Peachfur, Swampclaw, and Slatefur turned to Whirlheart, flicking their ears for an answer.

"How?" Swampclaw demanded.

Whirlheart sat taller, determination burning like a flame in her blue eyes. "I will send them a sign, a vision: the vision of falling stars."

Chapter 1

Echokit stepped out of the nursery, a warm breeze ruffling her fur.

"Wait!" she called as she raced after her sister, Whisperkit, and out into the clearing in the middle of the camp.

The DawnClan camp was in a thick grove of pine trees, offering shade on hot days and shelter from the pounding rain that came during storms. The entrance to the camp was in between two large bramble bushes, with some bracken lining the forest floor around them.

Straight ahead from there, a cliff rose up about three or four fox-lengths tall, where the leader's and medicine cats' dens were. The medicine cats' den lay in a crevice in the bottom of the stone wall, the entrance covered in vines and ivy. To the right of the medicine cats' den was a large, lichen-covered boulder, called the High-stone, where the DawnClan leader, Eveningstar, called Clan meetings.

If a cat jumped up onto the High-stone, they'd find a little opening in the stone wall lined with lichen and moss, where the leader's den was.

To the left of the camp entrance were the elders' den, warriors' den, apprentices' den, and the nursery. The elders' den was closest to the camp's center underneath three pine trees with low hanging branches. The warriors' den was made similar to the elder's, but was much larger, allowing more cats make their nests. A large clump of heather bushes grew further into the camp where the apprentices' den and nursery were. On one side, the opening lead into a large space for the apprentices to sleep, and on the other, there was a smaller opening, but it lead into a larger bush behind it, giving the queens and kits plenty of room.

At the back of the camp was an old, mossy log where the fresh-kill pile was. And in the clearing at the center of the camp, the trees

opened up to the sky, allowing sunlight to stream through. In the sun rays' reach were three small, lichen-covered rocks, called the sunning-stones, where many cats sunned themselves on warm days. Surrounding them was a large patch of grass and wildflowers, dancing in the breeze.

As Echokit passed the clearing, she caught a glimpse of the evening patrol returning. At the head was Twigfoot, the DawnClan deputy. Behind him was Echokit's and Whisperkit's mother Sparktail, their father Rustypelt, and Copperleaf with his apprentice, Sparrowpaw.

"Where are you two going?" Sparktail asked her kits.

"We're just going to get some fresh-kill," replied Whisperkit.

"Alright. Just make sure you bring some for Sagetail, she'll need it so she has enough milk to feed Raykit."

"We will!" Echokit called as her mother padded away.

"Wow! The fresh-kill pile is huge!" exclaimed Whisperkit. "I've never seen it so full!"

"That's one of the best things about new-leaf: the fresh-kill pile getting bigger. And new-leaf is only beginning!" meowed Copperleaf, coming to take his share of prey. "But by the time leaf-bare rolls around again, this pile will be less than half this size."

"That's when I'll be an apprentice, or maybe even a warrior! And I'll hunt day and night to make sure that the whole Clan is fed, every last cat!" meowed Echokit enthusiastically.

Copperleaf let out a purr of amusement. "Yes, I'm sure you will. Now, I said I'd take some fresh-kill to Sparrowpaw, so I'd better go."

Echoing watched the older warrior go, then she bent down to pick up a vole for herself and found a thrush for Sagetail.

"Come on, let's go," muttered Whisperkit through a mouthful of mouse.

Echokit followed her sister into the nursery and heard a loud cry.

"Shhh, calm down, calm down," a soft voice murmured, "You're going to be alright."

As Echokit's eyes became used to the dimness of the nursery, she saw Sagetail comforting her only kit, Raykit. She walked in, his little eyes twinkling as he looked up at her.

When Sagetail saw Echokit, she looked up. "Is that thrush for me?"

"Yes," meowed Echokit, dropping the prey.

"Thank you, Echokit. Now go join your denmates and enjoy your vole," she smiled.

Echokit dipped her head and padded to the other side of the nursery, where she saw her sister sitting with the other kits, who were three moons younger than Echokit and Whisperkit. They were Moonshine's kits, and their father was the deputy, Twigfoot. The tom-kit, Hailkit, was dark gray with a white underbelly and had bright blue eyes. His two sisters, Cloverkit and Yellowkit, were slightly smaller than he was. Cloverkit was black-furred with green eyes and Yellowkit was a light orange tabby with green eyes.

Echokit reached the other kits and sat next to Yellowkit and Cloverkit. Hailkit was telling a story of a made-up battle between DawnClan and the other three Clans: DuskClan, NightClan, and DayClan.

"So Twigfoot launched himself at a DuskClan warrior and bit her hard on the back, which sent her running for the trees, yowling for her mother," Hailkit meowed, and the other kits laughed.

"Then out of nowhere, a huge DayClan tom the size of the High-stone towered over Twigfoot and pounced," Hailkit meowed in exaggeration, standing on his back legs and clawing at the air at an imaginary enemy. He jumped and made a loud crashing sound. "Then, lightning struck the tree behind them and sparks flew everywhere, and their fur got burnt. All the cats cried out in pain and tried to hide when the thunder echoed through the forest.

"But that didn't stop Twigfoot; he faced his enemy once more and

clawed the cat's nose, and blood went everywhere. The enemy let out a yowl, but still didn't give up. He jumped on top of Twigfoot and there was a loud cracking of his bones breaking." He paused, flattening his ears and flashing his gaze across the den.

"And that's when the rain started falling," Hailkit continued in a lower voice. "Harder and harder, until the cats couldn't see more than a few tail-lengths in front of them. Every cat panicked, the rain making every cat smell the same. Cats came out of nowhere, and sometimes cats would find themselves fighting their own Clanmates." Cloverkit gasped, and Yellowkit widened her eyes in fake fright.

"Then, Eveningstar, our very own leader, raced into the battle with a huge patrol following him. He had brought reinforcements! Twigfoot ran with his Clanmates back into battle," Hailkit meowed with intensity, then he lowered his voice and spoke slowly. "But, before long, they found their path... blocked..."

"Okay, storytime is over," meowed a voice behind Echokit. It was her mother! Echokit turned around, upset that she had interrupted Hailkit's story.

"Awww, but Sparktail! We were just getting to the bestest part!" wailed Hailkit, still perched on his hind paws.

"I know, but the sun has already set, and it's getting late. Moonshine told me she wants you three," she nodded to Hailkit, Yellowkit, and Cloverkit, "over by your nests. My kits, come on, we must get to bed."

"But we're not tired!" protested Whisperkit, yawning.

Sparktail shot her a stern look and started walking away, and Whisperkit followed with her ears flattened.

Echokit sighed and padded after her mother and sister to their nests. She gathered her moss, freshly changed, and made a soft nest out of it. She circled around it until it was comfortable and fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched it.

Chapter 2

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Echokit opened her eyes to see Yellowkit standing over her.

"Guess what!" Yellowkit squealed.

"What?" Echokit asked sleepily, rolling back over in her nest.

"I'm going to be the next medicine cat! I'm going to be Goldheart's apprentice!" She let out a long pur.

"Really? Congratulations," Echokit meowed, not too enthusiastically. Yellowkit didn't notice Echokit's tone and just dashed out of the nursery.

Echokit pushed herself up from her nest and looked around to see that everyone in the nursery was unwillingly awake too. Their eyes were half-closed and they yawned every few heartbeats. It looked like Yellowkit wanted the whole camp to know she was going to be Goldheart's apprentice.

"She woke you up too?" came a voice behind Echokit. She turned around to see Whisperkit padding over to her.

"Yeah," replied Echokit, yawning.

"Well at least she's excited. I mean, I would be. Not many cats follow that path," meowed Whisperkit.

"Yeah, a little too excited is more like it though."

They both laughed.

"Want to go get some fresh-kill?" asked Whisperkit, "I'm so hungry I could eat a fox!"

"Sure," Echokit replied, purring with amusement.

As the two sisters stepped out of the nursery, Echokit realized that it was still dark out. The sun hadn't even come up yet!

"It's not even sunrise yet! Yellowkit!" Echokit sighed.

"I know. The dawn patrol hasn't even left yet. I wish we could go with them. I can't wait until we're apprentices!" Whisperkit squealed as they reached the old mossy log where the fresh-kill pile was. "We'll get to go on patrols, hunt for the Clan, and defend our borders!"

"And the best part is that we get to actually go to a Gathering and meet cats from all the other Clans!" Echokit joined in.

"I know! I can't wait to meet them! It'll be so cool!" Whisperkit meowed.

Echokit looked down toward her paws at the fresh-kill pile. She chose a nice big sparrow for them to share. They took their prey to the sunning-stones in the clearing, where they heard Yellowkit boasting to Aspenleaf and Prairiefoot, who were two younger warriors.

Echokit and Whisperkit glanced at each other and purred with amusement.

"Goldheart must have noticed my interest in healing and herbs, so he asked me if I wanted to be his apprentice and I said 'Of course!'" Yellowkit was bouncing with joy.

Aspenleaf purred with amusement and teased, "You'll have the whole camp know before sunrise, won't you?"

Yellowkit just beamed but said nothing.

Echokit sat down and watched Prairiefoot, his whiskers twitching with amusement as he listened to Yellowkit.

"I wonder if she woke the elders," Echokit meowed, "They wouldn't be too happy if she did."

"Yeah, Fogtail would be really upset she wouldn't have been able to

sleep until the next moon!" Whisperkit joked.

"And Ferrettail would probably claw Yellowkit's ears off because she woke him up for something so 'unimportant'!" Echokit joked back and they both burst out laughing. "But I don't think Spruceclaw would mind, he's the friendliest of the three elders."

"Moonshine said it was because he only joined the elders a few moons before we were born," Whisperkit observed.

"Yeah, he hasn't picked up 'Elder's Disease' yet," Echokit purred with amusement.

"I hope you're showing respect for your Clanmates, all of them," meowed a voice sternly behind them. Both kits turned around and found themselves looking at their father, Rustypelt.

"We are," Whisperkit squeaked.

"Huh." Rustypelt looked unconvinced. "Now finish your meal. Then I want you to go back to the nursery where you won't cause any trouble," he scolded, "I won't have any cat, especially not my kits, disrespecting their Clanmates."

"Okay," murmured Echokit, avoiding her father's eyes.

Echokit and Whisperkit finished their sparrow in silence then got up and padded over to the nursery.

When they got there, they weren't surprised to see Yellowkit boasting loudly to Eaglepaw and Sparrowpaw that she was going to be the next medicine cat.

Echokit walked into the nursery and saw Cloverkit and Hailkit, looking relieved to see Echokit and Whisperkit coming back. "Thank StarClan!" meowed Hailkit, "We thought you'd never come back and that we would have to listen to Yellowkit telling us again that she was Goldheart's apprentice." He sighed with exasperation.

"Yes, we'll she's probably told the entire camp by now so she'll soon get over it." Cloverkit meowed.

"Let's hope so," muttered Hailkit. Then his ears perked up and he sniffed the air. "Seems like Eveningstar is awake, and he's talking to Twigfoot."

Echokit sniffed the air, and sure enough, she could smell Eveningstar and Twigfoot. "Wow, Hailkit!" she exclaimed, "you have a sharp sense of smell! I didn't even notice until you pointed it out! You'll be the best tracker DawnClan has seen for many seasons!"

Hailkit puffed out his chest, and then replied, "It's nothing, really."

They looked outside to see Eveningstar and Twigfoot in deep conversation. Then Twigfoot nodded to Eveningstar and joined Copperleaf and Twilightfoot, both senior warriors. The two warriors nodded to their deputy then sent their apprentices, Eaglepaw and Sparrowpaw, away to the apprentices' den looking confused but excited.

"What do you think they're doing?" asked Cloverkit.

"Well, Twilightfoot is Eaglepaw's mentor, and Copperleaf is Sparrowpaw's mentor; so maybe Twigfoot want to make them warriors!" whispered Hailkit, with a hint of jealousy in his voice.

"No, not yet," meowed Whisperkit, "Remember? Apprentices have to pass an assessment before they can be made warriors, and we would have known if Eaglepaw and Sparrowpaw had passed their assessments. It would've been around the whole camp by sunhigh, they would have made sure of it."

Echokit nodded and watched the warriors once more and saw that Copperleaf and Twilightfoot had left Twigfoot and were heading back toward their apprentices. Eaglepaw had a look of determination spread all over his face and Sparrowpaw looked scared but sure of herself.

"Yep, they're definitely having their assessments today," Echokit agreed enviously.

"Lucky furballs!" muttered Hailkit, "And we're not even apprentices yet! We have to wait three more moons!"

"It'll go by faster than you think," Whisperkit meowed, trying to cheer them up.

"Yeah, I don't know about that," Cloverkit sighed.

There was a silence.

"Look, the sunrise! I've never seen one before," meowed Echokit, gazing at the lightening sky. It was turning a shade of orange, and it looked a bit like Yellowkit's pelt. She looked around to see that not many other cats were enjoying the sunrise. *They must have seen a lot of sunrises in their lifetime, especially when they go on dawn patrols*, she thought. *Lucky furballs*.

"Come on," Echokit heard Twigfoot meow and she turned to see him talking to a group of warriors, "the dawn patrol is a little late." And he headed out of camp with Prairiefoot, Rustypelt, Aspenleaf, and Moonshine.

Behind them, Twilightfoot and Copperleaf were leading their apprentices out of camp to do their assessment. Sunfur, their mother, wished them luck and licked their heads before they left. Both apprentices trotted with heads high as they left the camp.

Eveningstar, the leader of DawnClan, padded over to Sparktail, who was sitting with two other warriors, Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt. "Sparktail, you can lead one, and Bronzepelt, you can lead the other. Pick whomever you like." And he leapt off the High-stone and padded over toward the fresh-kill pile.

"Okay," Bronzepelt meowed. I'll take Gravelpelt and Sunfur." Bronzepelt nodded to his patrol.

"And Creekfall and Meadowheart," Sparktail meowed to the two younger warriors, "you can come with me."

Echokit blinked as she watched the warriors bustle about and sighed, longing for the day she could join them.

"Hopefully I'll be able to lead a patrol one day," meowed Hailkit, puffing out his chest.

"I'm sure you will," Cloverkit meowed, nudging her brother playfully.

"Hey!" Hailkit yowled.

Cloverkit had just pounced on her brother and was tackling him to the ground. They tussled and rolled in the grass, kicking up dust. Echokit and Whisperkit burst out laughing.

"Can I play?" meowed Yellowkit, racing toward them.

Cloverkit and Hailkit stopped immediately, and Echokit and Whisperkit stopped laughing and turned to look at Yellowkit.

"Done enough bragging yet?" growled Hailkit, getting up to face his sister, "Going to pay attention to us again?"

"I was only excited," murmured Yellowkit, staring at Hailkit, looking shocked at his tone.

"You didn't think that the Clan would find out when Goldheart announced it?" Hailkit asked.

Cloverkit stared at her paws. It was obvious to Echokit that she was never really upset about Yellowkit's bragging. It looked as if Cloverkit thought Hailkit was overreacting. Echokit thought Cloverkit was right, and that Hailkit was jealous that Yellowkit got a special place in the Clan.

"I-I'm sorry, I told you, I'm really excited. I just wanted to tell everyone. I-I didn't mean to brag or anything," she meowed quietly, meeting Hailkit's eyes with determination.

"Yeah, we know, Yellowkit!" meowed Cloverkit, finally looking at her with a gleam of amusement in her green eyes, "I forgive you." She glared at Hailkit with a forgive-her-or-I'll-claw-your-ears-off look.

"Oh alright! I forgive you, but next time something exciting happens, don't go bragging to the whole camp and wake up every cat do doing it!" Hailkit grumbled, a hint of envy still in his voice.

"I won't," Yellowkit promised, "Now, can I play?" she asked again.

"Oh alright. Echokit! Whisperkit! Are you playing too?" Hailkit meowed.

Glad that their argument was over, Echokit replied, "Sure! What are we playing?"

"Hailkit and I could be NightClan warriors!" exclaimed Cloverkit, "And you three could be from DawnClan, and... and there's a battle over prey!" She nodded to Yellowkit, Echokit, and Whisperkit.

"Cool! Let's battle!" Hailkit yowled, racing toward Yellowkit.

Echokit looked around raced toward Cloverkit and bowled her over. She squealed then rolled on her belly and Echokit jumped on her. Then, Cloverkit unexpectedly kicked Echokit's stomach with her hind legs, launching her off.

Echokit turned and saw her own warriors being pushed into a corner by the NightClan warrior, Hailkit. She raced to their side and hit Hailkit's muzzle with her paw. Hailkit turned to face her and jumped onto her back. Echokit thought quickly and rolled over, crushing Hailkit. But it didn't work. When she stood back up, he was still on her back. Then, all of a sudden the weight was lifted.

Whisperkit had knocked him off of her! Echokit turned around to face Cloverkit again when she heard the sound of many pawsteps running toward the camp entrance. Echokit turned, waiting to see what had made the racket. Cloverkit stopped and got up, worry in her green eyes. Echokit sniffed the air and realized the dawn patrol was coming back.

They're back too early, she thought in worry. She recognized Moonshine, and Prairiefoot, and Twigfoot. But where was the rest of the patrol: Aspenleaf and Rustypelt?

The three warriors raced into the camp, each with claw marks on their pelts and dried blood crusting in their fur. Every cat in the camp turned to see what was happening, their ears perked in worry and surprise. Then Twigfoot halted abruptly and looked around.

"Eveningstar!" he yowled.

Chapter 3

Eveningstar appeared from around the other side of the High-stone at once and ran over to Twigfoot. "What's the matter?" he asked urgently.

"It's Aspenleaf! A DayClan patrol had crossed our border, so we tracked them down and found them near the river on our side, hunting." The warriors in the clearing exchanged glances of fury. "We asked them what they were doing and they said they were feeding their Clan. Prairiefoot and I told them to get out of our territory, but they told us it would soon belong to DayClan and that there was no point in defending it anymore. We fought them off and they're gone now. But Aspenleaf got a bad gouge on her belly and she's lost a lot of blood," Twigfoot meowed in a rush. He turned to Goldheart. "We need you to come with us. We would have carried her back, but we didn't want her to lose any more blood. Rustypelt stayed with her and put cobwebs on her wound."

"Good thinking," Goldheart meowed. "I'm glad you didn't move her. Prairiefoot, can you help me carry the herbs?" Goldheart asked urgently. Prairiefoot nodded and followed the medicine cat into his den.

When they emerged from the den again in a rush, Goldheart and Prairiefoot were both carrying a variety of plants in their jaws.

"Lead the way, Twigfoot," Goldheart meowed through his mouthful of herbs. Twigfoot and Moonshine sprinted out of the camp, Goldheart and Prairiefoot following close behind.

"Oh, I hope Aspenleaf will be okay," Whisperkit meowed.

"Goldheart is an experienced medicine cat; he'll know what to do. Aspenleaf will not die," Echokit replied firmly. She just hoped her words were true.

* * *

By sunhigh, the patrol still hadn't returned with Aspenleaf, but the hunting patrols did return with prey. Both hunting patrols looked like they had enough prey to feed the Clan for a moon.

Sparktail padded over to them carrying two mice and a sparrow. "What happened?" she asked, "I heard that the dawn patrol was attacked by a DayClan patrol." Sparktail dropped a mouse at Echokit's paws and a sparrow at Whisperkit's.

"Yeah," Whisperkit meowed sadly as she took a bite of her sparrow, "Aspenleaf got a pretty bad stomach wound, by the sound of it. And she had lost a lot of blood. Rustypelt had stayed with her while Twigfoot, Prairiefoot, and Moonshine ran back for help. And they still haven't come back."

"Well, let's hope she's alright," muttered Sparktail.

"She will be," meowed Echokit confidently, refusing to believe otherwise.

They finished their meals in silence and sat waiting for the patrol to return.

After what seemed like moons, Echokit heard heavy breathing and muffled pawsteps outside the camp; the patrol was returning!

"They're back!" yowled Sunfur, her nose in the air as she picked up the patrol's scent.

Every cat looked up and watched as Prairiefoot and Rustypelt carried Aspenleaf into the camp. Goldheart raced ahead into the medicine cats' den. Yellowkit, who was watching her future mentor eagerly, bolted across the camp and into his den before Moonshine could stop her.

As Rustypelt and Prairiefoot carried Aspenleaf closer, Echokit realized Aspenleaf was unconscious and that she was dripping blood, even with the cobwebs pressed against her wound. Echokit hoped that she wasn't dead and prayed to StarClan that she would be okay.

Echokit was suddenly pushed aside as Creekfall raced toward the

medicine cats' den. "Aspenleaf!" he yowled, "Oh, please don't be dead!" Then he disappeared into the stone cave.

When Rustypelt reappeared from the medicine cats' den just heartbeats later, he brought Creekfall with him, who was looking sad, but mostly angry. Echokit raced over and asked her father, "Will she be all right?"

He looked down at Echokit and licked her head, "Let's hope so. I cannot be certain, but Goldheart said that he'd be able to heal the wound, but it will be hard to keep it from getting infected, because it's a big gash. He said if she did heal, she'd be in the medicine cats' den for at least a moon."

"I'm going to kill those DayClan warriors!" Creekfall promised, snarling. His silver tabby fur was all fluffed up, and his teeth were bared and his claws were unsheathed. Echokit thought he looked really scary and silently thanked StarClan that she was not a DayClan cat.

"Woah, not so fast. Don't worry, they'll pay for what they've done, but maybe not with death," Rustypelt told him sternly.

Creekfall didn't look satisfied.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!" came the call from Eveningstar as he leapt up onto the High-stone.

Cats slowly began to gather beneath the great boulder. Echokit noticed that Sparrowpaw and Eaglepaw had returned, and she was impressed to find them not yowling to the whole Clan that they had passed the assessment, as she knew they had. Their eyes were filled with sadness and anger as they sat beneath the High-stone with Sunfur. Echokit found a space and sat between Cloverkit and Sparktail, and looked up at her leader.

"Today, as you have most likely heard, our dawn patrol was attacked by a DayClan one," Eveningstar meowed, "Twigfoot told me they were hunting on our side of the river." Many cats yowled their protests, some looking scared, but most looking angry and

defiant. When it had quieted down, Eveningstar continued, "He also told me that they were trying to expand their hunting grounds. Our patrol drove them from our territory, but Aspenleaf got a bad gash on her stomach."

All of the cats hissed and snarled, Creekfall by far the loudest, his eyes flaming with rage, promising revenge. Eveningstar waited until the noise died down again before meowing, "Goldheart is working on her as we speak and we pray to StarClan that she will heal." Every cat fell silent and closed their eyes, Creekfall's face displaying immense grief as he looked down at his paws.

Then Creekfall looked up suddenly, with anger and defiance burning in his eyes once again, and yowled, "What are we going to do at the Gathering?" He sounded like he wanted to go rip the throats out of the cats who had wounded Aspenleaf.

"I will tell all the Clans of this incident and warn DayClan of the consequences they will receive if they set paw on our territory again." Eveningstar answered calmly, but his answer didn't satisfy Creekfall in the slightest.

"Now on a happier note," Eveningstar started. "Because of this incident, we haven't been able to celebrate two apprentices' successes. Today Twilightfoot and Copperleaf told me that Eaglepaw and Sparrowpaw passed their assessments and are ready to become warriors."

Eaglepaw and Sparrowpaw looked as if they were going to burst with excitement, and their mother, Sunfur, looked as excited they did.

"Come here, you two," Eveningstar meowed, his light brown eyes glistening with amusement.

The two apprentices bounced up and trotted toward the High-stone. Once on top of it, Eveningstar continued. "I, Eveningstar, leader of DawnClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

He turned to Sparrowpaw and meowed, "Sparrowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Sparrowpaw squeaked, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Sparrowpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Sparrowtail. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and skill in hunting, and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Sparrowtail! Sparrowtail!" the Clan welcomed her, Sunfur the loudest of all.

Eveningstar now turned to Eaglepaw. "Eaglepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Eaglepaw meowed confidently, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Eaglepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Eaglefeather. StarClan honors your courage and determination and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Eaglefeather! Eaglefeather!" yowled the Clan, with Sunfur and Sparrowtail at the lead.

Once down from the High-stone, Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail were overwhelmed by their mother's praise. They purred and turned to their mentors, Twilightfoot and Copperleaf, who congratulated them next. After the crowd had become smaller, Echokit went over with Whisperkit and Yellowkit to congratulate them too. Sparrowtail looked overwhelmed, but Eaglefeather looked amazed and confident.

That'll be me someday, Echokit vowed. One day, I'll be important, just like them.

* * *

It had been four sunrises since Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail had

been made warriors, and the Clan bustled with extra energy and purpose, fueled by the DayClan patrol's attack.

Goldheart said Aspenleaf was healing, though Echokit thought it didn't look like it. Every time she would go and visit her, her breathing was quick and shallow. Goldheart assured her that it was just because of the shock and from how deep her wound was. He was giving her lots of poppy seeds, that's why she was asleep all the time.

Eveningstar had ordered extra patrols along the DayClan border to make sure that they didn't think about hunting on DawnClan territory again; Creekfall had volunteered to go on every one of those extra patrols. Echokit guessed he really wanted his revenge; anytime he wasn't on a patrol, he was sitting with Aspenleaf. Once Echokit overheard him muttering, 'Don't worry, I'm going to kill the cats who did this to you', even though Aspenleaf was unconscious and could never hear his promise.

Echokit was now sitting at the fresh-kill log, eating a rabbit with Whisperkit. It was sunhigh and the hunting patrol had just returned, Sunfur at the head of it, with Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather, and Meadowheart behind her. As they got closer to the fresh-kill log, Echokit heard Meadowheart say, "It's weird that we don't have any apprentices right now. But Sparktail's kits won't be kits forever."

Sunfur meowed, "Well, the Gathering is tonight, which means they are six moons old. Eveningstar will make them apprentices any day now. I wonder who their mentors will be?"

Meadowheart shrugged and headed over toward the fresh-kill pile with her catch, Sunfur and Eaglefeather behind her. When they reached the log, they dropped their prey and padded in separate directions.

Echokit swelled in excitement as she heard the warriors say this. It was true; today she and Whisperkit were six moons old. They should be made apprentices now! Echokit understood why their apprentice ceremony wouldn't be today; what with the DayClan attack, Eveningstar had been really busy with the extra patrols and with preparation for tonight's Gathering. But Echokit thought he

ought to realize soon that she and Whisperkit were ready to be apprentices!

She sighed and turned to Whisperkit, meowing, "I wonder who Eveningstar is taking to the Gathering? I wish he'd hurry up and make us apprentices so we could go too."

"Well he'll definitely take Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather. They're new warriors. But he won't take us; even if he did make us apprentices, we wouldn't be able to go tonight anyway. We'd be too new."

"Yeah," replied Echokit, feeling a little anxious. She was ready to become an apprentice now. Why couldn't any cat see that?

She looked over at Eveningstar. He was talking to Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail, who were bursting with excitement. Jealousy tingled in Echokit's paws. The lucky furballs, she thought.

Just then, Meadowheart and Prairiefoot, who had been visiting Aspenleaf, came running out of the medicine cats' den and raced right past Echopaw towards Creekfall, who was staring at his half-eaten vole by his paws.

"Creekfall!" Meadowheart purred.

Creekfall looked up, his ears twitching in surprise, "Uh, yes?"

"It's Aspenleaf! She's—"

"She's not dead, is she?" growled Creekfall, his voice sounding close to hysteria.

Prairiefoot shook his head. "No, she's not dead, Creekfall. She just woke up. And Goldheart said to tell—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Creekfall sprinted toward the medicine cats' den.

Echokit shared a glance with Whisperkit.

Yellowkit trotted up from behind them, ears pricked. "Did they say that Aspenleaf is awake?"

Echokit nodded. "That's what Meadowheart and Prairiefoot said."

Yellowkit stood up and ran toward the medicine cats' den, fur fluffed in curiosity. Whisperkit got up and raced after her. Echokit quickly got to her paws and followed.

"Wait!" she called after sister.

Before they could go in, however, their path was blocked by Goldheart. "Give Creekfall and Aspenleaf some time," he meowed gently, "Creekfall has been very depressed these last few days. This should make up for it."

Yellowkit, Echokit, and Whisperkit glanced at each other then nodded at Goldheart. They walked back across the camp to the clearing and sat down on one of the sunning-stones.

"Oh, I hope Aspenleaf will be healed soon," Whisperkit murmured, and Echokit nodded silently.

Yellowkit blinked unconcernedly. "She will. With Goldheart healing her, she'll be better soon, don't worry."

* * *

At dusk, Eveningstar came out of his den and yowled, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!"

At once, cats started emerging from their dens and gathered to hear what Eveningstar had to say. Once everyone was settled down, Eveningstar continued.

"As you all know, tonight is the Gathering, and I need to choose the patrol I will take to the Pointed Mountain."

Echokit looked across the clearing in jealousy. The Pointed Mountain was where all four Clans met for the Gathering each full moon. Echokit couldn't wait to go. She longed to travel outside DawnClan territory, and she especially longed to meet cats from the other Clans.

She looked back up at Eveningstar as he continued. "I will take Twigfoot, Rustypelt, and Sparktail," he scanned the camp. "And Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather, Meadowheart, Copperleaf... and Ferrettail, Fogtail, and Spruceclaw. Cats that I have called, we leave at moonrise."

Echokit looked around and saw the Gathering patrol heading for the camp entrance, obviously ready to go. She bounded up to her parents, who were going. "Tell me everything that happens!" she made them promise. "This will be an important Gathering."

Rustypelt licked her head. "We will," he assured her.

Sparktail looked down at her and meowed, "We'll see you and Whisperkit tomorrow. Make sure and tell her goodbye for us." Then she looked around the camp. "Where is she anyway?"

"I don't know. Probably with Cloverkit, Hailkit, and Yellowkit."

"Let's go!" yowled Eveningstar, staring at the full moon peeking over the horizon. "We've got an important Gathering to get to!"

With that, Sparktail murmured her last goodbye and the patrol turned and raced away toward the Pointed Mountain, disappearing from Echokit's sight.

Echokit turned around and saw Prairiefoot heading toward the warriors' den with Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt close behind. She looked around but found no sign of her sister. Where is that sneaky furball?

She turned and saw Hailkit, Cloverkit, and Yellowkit being herded toward the nursery by Moonshine, protests erupting from their mouths.

Over her kits' noise Moonshine meowed, "Echokit, you need to go to sleep soon too. Sparktail would want you asleep soon."

"Okay, right after I find Whisperkit," she promised.

Moonshine nodded.

Echokit continued the search for her sister, and finally found her sitting beside the fresh-kill pile, gazing up at the thick band of stars that made up Silverpelt.

"Whisperkit, Moonshine wants us to get to bed."

Whisperkit didn't shift her gaze away from the sky. "Okay, I'm coming." After a pause, she murmured, "Do you think the Gathering will go alright? Especially since Eveningstar is confronting DayClan about intruding on our territory and harming Aspenleaf?"

Echokit glanced at the moon, glowing between the tree trunks, and sighed. "Yes, with any luck, DayClan will be stopped from trying to steal our territory. I'm sure every cat will be fine."

Whisperkit nodded, then followed Echokit across the clearing to the nursery.

Echokit thought about what Whisperkit had said. She looked up at the night sky again and sighed. There were no clouds in sight, so StarClan wasn't angry.

Shouldn't StarClan be angry that DayClan wants to expand their territory, when there were always supposed to be four Clans? Echokit thought. Maybe when they get to the Gathering StarClan will hide the moon...

Echokit blinked, sighed, then pushed her way into the nursery, with Whisperkit right behind her.

Chapter 4

Echokit opened her eyes and saw the sun shining on the clearing in the center of the camp. She yawned and stretched her legs, and looked at Whisperkit's nest. It smelled stale. *She must have woken up awhile ago*, Echokit thought.

She stretched again and then padded to the entrance of the nursery. Echokit realized that it was way past sunhigh and that she must have been really tired last night. She looked out at the clearing and saw Prairiefoot and Creekfall sitting by the sunning stones, Creekfall occasionally glancing at the medicine cats' den. Echokit looked around for any sign of her mother or father and wondered where they could be. It was past sun-high and they still weren't anywhere to be seen. Then she remembered that they had gone to the Gathering last night and that they were probably still sleeping.

Echokit padded over to the old mossy log to join Cloverkit, Yellowkit, Whisperkit, and Hailkit at the fresh-kill pile.

"Wow, Echokit! You slept like a hibernating fox!" Cloverkit exclaimed.

Echokit shrugged, then asked, "Is anyone who went to the Gathering awake yet?"

"Well, some are, but they went on the hunting patrols," Hailkit sighed. "Most of them are still sleeping, except for the elders. But I'm not going to ask them about it. They'd probably say 'Hey! I need my fresh moss now! Hurry up you useless flea-bag!'" Hailkit imitated the elders loudly.

All of them laughed, then Echokit hissed, "Shush! If any cat heard us, we'd probably have to search the elders for ticks for the next six moons!"

That stopped Hailkit from making fun of the elders, but they all

continued to laugh.

They finished their meals in silence, Echokit glancing at the warriors' den every few mouthfuls for any sign of her parents. *They promised to tell me about it!* Echokit thought.

"Hey look, it's Meadowheart! She went to the Gathering last night!" meowed Cloverkit in a hushed whisper.

Echokit followed Cloverkit's gaze until she found Meadowheart padding toward Prairiefoot and Creekfall. Then she sat down with them and they started talking.

"Mouse-dung! Now how are we supposed to ask her? She's with other warriors. She won't want to talk to a bunch of kits!" hissed Cloverkit.

"I know your father would tell us," meowed Whisperkit, looking over at Twigfoot.

"Yeah, but he's the deputy. So he's always busy," complained Hailkit.

"Well, maybe he's not so busy now, let's just go and ask him. Maybe he'll say yes," suggested Echokit.

"I say it's worth a try," meowed Hailkit eagerly, getting to his paws.

"I don't know...he might be busy, you never know," whispered Cloverkit.

"Oh come on!" teased Hailkit, "Don't be such a scared furball!"

"Oh all right, I'm coming," sighed Cloverkit, getting to her paws at last.

The five padded over toward Twigfoot, who was sitting next to the High-stone, as if waiting for someone. He was watching Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt, who were sitting beside the elders' den.

"Father!" Hailkit called, bounding up to him.

Twigfoot pricked up his ears and glanced at Hailkit. "Yes?"

"We were wondering if you could tell us about the Gathering last night," meowed Cloverkit, staring up at her father eagerly.

"Of course," he replied, "I have to tell Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt something. I'll be back in a moment."

"Alright," agreed Cloverkit as Twigfoot padded away toward the two warriors.

"What do you think he's telling them?" wondered Echokit.

"No idea. He could be telling them anything," meowed Hailkit, watching his father.

After a few moments, Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt nodded and padded toward the warriors' den, meowing to each other in hushed voices. Watching them go, Twigfoot stood up and walked back to Echokit, Whisperkit, Cloverkit, Yellowkit, and Hailkit.

"What did you ask them?" Echokit asked.

"Something between them, me, and Eveningstar," he replied to Echokit's disappointment. He must have noticed because he added, "You will see, very soon in fact."

The four of them nodded and Twigfoot continued, "So you want to know about the Gathering? The whole thing? Or just the part when Eveningstar mentioned DayClan's attack?"

"All of it," Hailkit exclaimed.

"Alright. Well, Orangestar spoke first—"

"Which Clan is he the leader of?" Cloverkit asked.

"DuskClan. Orangestar reported that all was well and that his Clan was well-fed this new-leaf. He also announced that they had named three new apprentices: Pantherpaw, Raccoonpaw, and Snowpaw. You'll meet them when you become apprentices I expect.

"Then Beechstar of NightClan spoke next. He said Twolegs had moved closer toward the river in search for fish, but they were still finding plenty of prey to feed their Clan. He also said that their medicine cat, Bushtail, had taken and apprentice named Icepaw, and she was to be the next medicine cat.

"After that, Rainstar, leader of DayClan—"

"That filthy, smelly, no-good, flea-bagged thief—" hissed Hailkit, but one look at his father's face and he quieted.

"Rainstar announced that her Clan welcomed two new warriors and that her Clan was coping well with the Twolegs and had enough prey to last them all of new-leaf and green-leaf. She mentioned nothing of her need to expand her territory. So—"

"She lied!" Echokit spat, disgusted at Rainstar and her will to lie to the rest of the Clans.

"So not only is she a thief, she's a lying thief!" growled Hailkit.

"So, she obviously doesn't have enough prey to last them all of green-leaf," Twigfoot continued, "The Twolegs must be scaring it all away. Every cat did notice that DayClan was skinnier than Rainstar made her Clan sound. The rest of DawnClan and I knew she was lying.

"Then, Eveningstar announced that we had also named two new warriors and that we were all getting enough prey and were healthy and strong. Finally, Eveningstar told everyone of DayClan's need to expand its territory and how they had attacked us and told us that they were going to hunt here in our territory if they liked. Rainstar turned to Eveningstar and spat in his face, calling him a liar."

"What?" snarled Hailkit, sounding outraged. "She lied twice? What kind of Clan leader is she? She disgusts me! Her whole, good-for-nothing Clan is so—" Then he stopped, seeing Twigfoot, and looked down at his paws.

"When I was heading back to the nursery last night, I didn't see any clouds. Wasn't StarClan angry?" Echokit asked, confused.

"Yes they were angry, but they did not send a cloud over the moon when Rainstar lied. They sent one when Rainstar hissed in Eveningstar's face. As you know, there's a truce at the Gathering each full moon. StarClan was angry that Rainstar was about to break the sacred truce," Twigfoot explained.

"So what did NightClan and DuskClan think?" Whisperkit asked.

"Nothing. They got scared when the cloud covered up the moon and then Orangestar told every cat that that was the signal to end the Gathering. Every Clan split up and, following their leaders, left the Pointed Mountain, heading back to their own territories. Eveningstar scowled and jumped down from the Lightning Tree, which is where the leaders sit during the Gathering, and told us not to worry, he'd get DayClan for what they had done.

"'In the meantime,' he had said, 'we will take extra patrols along the DayClan border, to keep an eye on them.' We all nodded and followed Eveningstar down the mountain and back to camp," Twigfoot finished.

"Wow, I can't believe that Rainstar would do that!" Cloverkit exclaimed.

"I know, and she was a very noble leader when she was first named DayClan's leader... Yes, she had her faults, anger being one of them, but she'd never tried to take another Clan's territory before. She was trying to show every cat that her Clan was strong, though she did it the wrong way," Twigfoot sighed.

"Twigfoot!" The five of them turned around to find Eveningstar padding toward them, "Have you organized the evening patrol yet?"

"Not yet, Eveningstar. But I will do that now," Twigfoot replied with a respectful dip of his head. Echokit motioned to the others that they should leave, and they headed for the clearing.

"Creekfall, can you lead the evening patrol?" Echokit heard Twigfoot meow.

"Sure, Twigfoot," replied Creekfall, "I just want to say goodnight to

Aspenleaf, she'll be asleep by the time I get back."

"Okay, but be quick. And you can take Prairiefoot, Bronzepelt, and Gravelpelt with you," Twigfoot ordered as Creekfall padded over to the medicine cats' den.

Echokit turned to look at Sparktail, who was sharing tongues with Rustypelt by the sunning-stones. Echokit walked over to join them.

"I heard about the Gathering," Echokit meowed as she reached her parents.

"Oh, yes. It was a long night," her mother sighed.

"But Eveningstar is doing the right thing, by not attacking DayClan, like most cats want to," meowed Rustypelt, looking over at his leader.

"Why don't you get some fresh-kill for Sagetail?" Sparktail meowed, "Go and tell Whisperkit."

"Okay, Mother," Echokit meowed politely, dipping her head. Then she turned around, heading back to Whisperkit.

"Sparktail wants us to head to the nursery and get fresh-kill for Sagetail. Maybe we can play with Raykit." Echokit suggested to Whisperkit.

"We'll come too," Cloverkit meowed, glancing at Hailkit and Yellowkit, who both nodded.

"Raykit! Raykit! R—" Sagetail's meow was replaced by a yowl of pain as Raykit bit his mother's tail. "RAYKIT! COME HERE NOW!" Sagetail growled.

Raykit scowled and dragged himself to his mother's side.

"You are NOT allowed to bite tails, especially not my tail!" She scolded, "Understand?"

Raykit nodded, the scowl still on his tiny face. He was feisty for a one-moon-old kit.

Sagetail sighed, then her anger disappeared and was replaced by a look of sorrow, "I know you want someone to play with. I wish you had brothers and sisters too; maybe you will someday," she soothed, wrapping her tail around her only son.

Raykit looked up as Echokit, Whisperkit, Cloverkit, and Hailkit walked in. He sure was growing fast. Echopaw dropped a piece of fresh-kill at Sagetail's paws, then glanced at Raykit, who slowly walked up to her.

"Do you want us to play with you?" Echokit asked the orange tom-kit kindly.

Raykit nodded shyly.

"Alright. We can play-fight. You can be the leader of DawnClan and I'll be the leader of NightClan. Is that's alright?" Echokit asked the others. They all nodded.

"Okay, since there are six of us, you can pick one cat, then I will; get it?" Echokit asked Raykit.

Raykit nodded then murmured, "H-how bout Hailkit?"

Hailkit puffed out his chest and padded over to Raykit's side.

"Okay," meowed Echokit, "Cloverkit?"

"Coming!" she squealed and padded to Echokit's side.

Raykit looked more confident when he said, "Whisperkit." Then his ears dropped to his head and he muttered, "S-sorry Y-Yellowkit. I-I didn't—"

"Oh don't be such a silly furball! I don't mind being last!" she teased, not looking at all offended. "I'll just go to Echokit's Clan."

"So now we fight!" called Hailkit and he raced to tackle Cloverkit. Echokit looked around at Cloverkit fighting Whisperkit, then she realized that Raykit was nowhere to be found.

Then all of a sudden she was bowled over and knocked to the

ground. Raykit was now on top of her, biting her back. She rolled over and heard a "huff" and she knew it had worked. Echokit whirled around to find Raykit scrambling to his paws. She then noticed how small Raykit actually was. He was less than more her size, and maybe she was being too hard on him.

But that didn't stop him, he raced between Echokit's front legs and pawed at her stomach. Then all of a sudden Raykit was on top of her again and she was knocked to the ground. He was on top of her, his thin nursery fur fluffed up. She would have been able to win easily, but she wanted to let Raykit win; he was only a young kit. "You win," she told him, laughing.

She looked around to see that Hailkit had pinned down Yellowkit, and Cloverkit had pinned down Whisperkit. Raykit's Clan had won two out of three.

"Yeah!" yowled Hailkit, trotting over to Raykit, followed by Whisperkit.

"I can't believe you were beaten by a barely one moon-old kit!" Whisperkit teased Echokit.

"He's very fast for such a small kit," Echokit replied.

Raykit beamed and sat as tall as his tiny body would let him.

"I think it's time for bed," meowed Sagetail, herding Raykit toward their nest.

"And you need some sleep too," meowed Moonshine, and gathered up her kits.

"We had better get to bed too," whispered Echokit.

"Yeah, but Sparktail hasn't come yet," Whisperkit replied, looking outside.

"She'll be right in," Moonshine meowed over her shoulder.

"Okay." Echokit nodded.

"Come on, Echokit, we can wait for Sparktail in our nests." Whisperkit yawned.

Echokit followed her sister to their nests and laid down in her soft moss. She lay awake for a while, and soon Sparktail joined them and curled up beside them, licking their fur free of the tangles it'd gotten during the play fight.

Echokit purred, and, before long, she gave in to her tiredness and fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Echokit was dreaming; she was sure of it. Even though the grass smelled real and felt real beneath her paws, she knew she was dreaming. How else could she get this far away from the camp? After all, she'd never been anywhere outside the camp, so how would she have gotten here?

Echokit turned around, wondering when she was going to wake up. It was probably the most boring dream she'd ever had.

Then a strange scent filled her nose. She turned around and found a silver she-cat with blue eyes sitting before her. She shook her head to try and clear away the dream.

"That won't work," meowed the she-cat quietly.

"Why not?" demanded Echokit, now a little scared, "I've never seen you before, so why would I have a dream about you? And besides, when I wake up, I'll be back in the nursery to look forward to another peaceful day at camp." She turned away and started padding into the forest, not knowing which way to go.

"I'm afraid that's not true."

"What do you mean?" Echokit exclaimed, turning around abruptly, "I am going back, aren't I? I haven't done anything to you, so why should you keep me hostage?" Echokit was now becoming really terrified and even more confused.

"Calm down. Yes, you are going back. I meant that you won't be able to go back and have another peaceful day at camp for a long time," she said, looking at Echokit sadly.

"Wh-what d-do you mean?" stuttered Echokit, "I'm not going to die, am I?"

"No, not for a quite a while."

"So what do you mean? And who are you? Why are you here?"

"It is a very long story. But I will tell you, don't worry. Okay, so who am I? I'm Whirlheart, one of your warrior ancestors."

"You're from StarClan then, aren't you?" Echokit asked, astonished.

Whirlheart nodded, then continued, "Now, for why I am here. Well, first, let's start with this: in the old Clans that patrolled a far away territory, something StarClan couldn't even predict happened: the earth started to shake. It was so bad that old, strong trees were uprooted, and fell onto many cats, instantly killing them. Then, the shaking brought water from under the ground up onto the forest, and it all flooded downhill taking huge rocks, trees, and even cats with it. It gathered speed as it headed downhill, and killed everything in its path. Every single kit and elder was killed, and the queens died trying to save their kits. After it had gone, the land was no longer suitable for life." Whirlheart shuddered.

"Nine warriors, two apprentices, and one medicine cat survived from all the Clans combined. They got together and immediately headed toward the mountains in search for a new home and food, despair and grief filling their hearts at their lost Clanmates. Four of the cats died from weakness, including both apprentices. And, unfortunately, disease swept through the remaining cats on their long, hard journey, and, without the proper herbs he was used to, the medicine cat couldn't save them and one more of the cats died. But, eventually the remaining seven reached a large group of loners in a Twoleg den, in a new peaceful forest on the other side of the mountains, where they treated the Clan cats and fed them, making them stronger again. The Clan cats realized that the loners behaved sort of like a Clan; more like a Clan than any other loners they'd come across, only they lived in a Twoleg den and had no StarClan or warrior code.

"One night, while he was sleeping, the medicine cat had a dream from StarClan, telling him that four of the loners would be the future of the new Clans: DawnClan, DuskClan, DayClan, and NightClan. He was told to separate the loners into these Clans based on their skill and where they hunted best. When he woke, he told the other Clan cats and said they would each take some cats into

different parts of the land and divide up territories like they did in their old home. They all nodded and went to speak with the loners. The loners liked the idea of a Clan because all cats with similar skills would stick together, and be stronger together.

"So Dawn, Dusk, Day, and Night were to be the new leaders, with help from the old Clan cats, who would take on the role of mentors because they were getting too old and weathered to lead a new Clan. The one medicine cat would train promising kits from each Clan, visiting each every half moon. Then they went their own separate ways, and eventually they became the new Clans, the ones here today.

"All has been peaceful since the new Clans were formed. But now a terrible danger looms over every cat, and the Clans are all in jeopardy of being destroyed; StarClan can sense it," Whirlheart finished, shaking her head with sorrow in her eyes.

Echokit stared blankly at Whirlheart, not knowing what to make of her speech.

"Why have you told me this?" Echokit asked, shock filling her voice.

Whirlheart didn't answer her question, she just stared ahead and meowed, "I'm here to show you a vision, a vision only you and your sister will share. That's why I came, not to talk about Clan history."

"Then why'd you tell me about Clan history?" Echokit asked.

"It is essential information, knowing the ways the Clans have worked in the past, and how they are working now. This is the first step for resolving arguments, reducing tensions, and creating peace: understanding your differences. And you, young one, will be needing those skills one day."

Echokit was more confused than ever.

Then Whirlheart started to fade, the starlight in her fur becoming less and less easy to notice. Then, suddenly, she was gone, and wind ripped at Echokit's pelt, threatening to blow her off her paws. The forest around her also started to fade, until all she could see was the

grass a tail-length in every direction around her. Echokit nearly fell over as the ground beneath her started moving. Echokit became really dizzy and closed her eyes. Then all was still again.

Echokit opened her eyes and saw the DawnClan camp, but it looked all dark and gray, and it was deserted. There was no sun, no scuttling prey, no birds singing in the trees, not even the usual sound or sight of cats. The whole forest seemed dead. Echokit looked at the clearing and saw that thick layers of leaves and dirt were all over the place. Only one small puddle of water lay in the dirt, but it looked dirty and gray too. Echokit realized that no cat, or any other animal, had been here for many seasons. Echokit became confused and looked around, searching for her Clanmates.

"Hello?" she called, but only her echo bouncing off of the cliff in the camp answered her.

"Hello?" she tried again, but there was still no answer. "Where are you all?"

She scanned the camp again, but still saw no signs of life or movement. Echokit sniffed the air and scented her Clanmates, but their scents were very stale.

"Where are you?" Echokit tried again, and the dust blew around her from her breath as she called out, but that was the only thing that moved.

"Someone answer me!" she called desperately. Then an icy stone dropped into her stomach as a horrible feeling sunk into her mind.

Have they all abandoned me?

Then Echokit felt it. The ground was vibrating beneath her. A cold claw raked down her back and a feeling of dread filled her whole body as her neck fur started to rise with fear. She looked around and saw the small, gray puddle of water. Every time the ground trembled, the shaking would send ripples across its surface. She frantically tried looking for the source of the shaking, but found none. Then she realized that the shaking must be coming from footsteps: footsteps of a very, very large animal.

"Help!" wailed Echokit. She tried to run, but her paws were rooted to the ground, "Help! Someone help me!" she yowled, but all was silent except for the steady thudding of the ground.

The trees and bushes around the entrance to the camp started trembling and Echokit realized that whatever was causing the shaking was getting very close very fast.

Then it stepped through the barrier. She tried to make out what it was, but shadows covered up most of its body. What she did see was two pitch black beady eyes, speaking of evil, staring at her, making her shiver and causing her fur to stand on end.

She looked down at its feet and shrieked in surprise. Attached to its jet black paws were the longest claws any cat had ever seen. They were nearly as long as her tail, and they looked sharper than all the claws of all the cats in all the Clans put together. Then she saw it's mouth and shrieked again. The teeth were nearly as long as it's claws and looked even sharper. A picture suddenly formed in her mind of a cat being killed in a single and effortless clamp of its jaws. She closed her eyes and tried to get rid of the image.

Then the creature yowled, louder than any thunder, stronger than any current in the river, and scarier than any tale she'd ever heard from the elders.

But as soon as it had started, the yowling stopped and was replaced by a voice, a whisper compared to the creature's yowl. Echokit realized it was a cat, and a cat she had recently met: Whirlheart! But this time, when she spoke, it wasn't in the soft voice she had heard when she first met her, but a hollow, emotionless voice that spoke ominous words of a terrible prophecy. "Darkness will veil the sky, but with the whispering voice of two, the forest, as one, will echo with light."

Echokit shuddered and everything went black.

* * *

Echokit opened her eyes, sunlight streaming through the gaps of the nursery wall. She yawned and looked outside. Whisperkit was

eating fresh-kill with Yellowkit and Cloverkit, laughing. The dawn patrol was just returning and reporting to Eveningstar. Creekfall and Copperleaf were sharing a sparrow by the warriors' den. Beside them, Sparrowtail was with her brother, Eaglefeather. Then Echokit saw her own mother and father sitting together by the sunning-stones. Everything was so peaceful and quiet, an ordinary new-leaf day.

Then she remembered her dream and her whole body shook. Whirlheart had said Whisperkit was getting the same vision, but it didn't look like she had had a terrible dream. She was happy as a fat mouse in green-leaf. Echokit became confused.

Was Whirlheart lying? Was it all really just a dream, a terrible nightmare? she thought. *It must have been. But then how would I have a vision about a cat I had never heard of or seen in my life? Why had it seemed so real? I'll just have to ask Whisperkit and find out,* she concluded.

She padded over to Whisperkit, Yellowkit, and Cloverkit and sat down beside them.

"Hey, Whisperkit, do you want to go play with Raykit?" Echokit asked her sister, trying to get her sister alone so she could ask her.

"Oh can we come too?" asked Cloverkit.

"Uh..." Echokit didn't know what to say.

"Of course they can," replied Whisperkit, giving Echokit a stern look.

"Are you sure?" asked Yellowkit, looking at Echokit.

"Oh yes, Echokit's just being an annoying furball," meowed Whisperkit, pretending to laugh.

All four kits got up and padded over to the nursery and kept glancing at Echokit.

When they got there, Echokit didn't even look at Raykit, let alone play with him. She was busy thinking of a way to get her sister

away from Cloverkit and Yellowkit. Echokit went over possibilities that didn't arouse suspicion, but couldn't think of any. Then she had it.

"Whisperkit, I'm not feeling too well, could you help me over to Goldheart's den?"

"What's wrong?" asked Whisperkit, sounding concerned.

"I think it was the mouse I ate," she lied, "I have a bellyache."

"Oh, okay. Let's go."

When they were out of earshot from the nursery, Echokit seized her chance.

"Whisperkit, I don't really have a bellyache. I just needed to ask you something."

"Alright," sighed Whisperkit, not at all sounding surprised. "Let's go to the dirtplace tunnel. No one usually goes in there."

Echokit followed Whisperkit to the dirtplace tunnel beside the elders' den.

"Okay, what is it?" asked Whisperkit, turning to face Echokit.

Echokit shuffled her paws nervously and began, "I had a dream last night. A StarClan warrior named Whirlheart came and told me that the Clans are in terrible danger. She showed me a vision and told me a prophecy. She also said you'd have the same dream. Did you?"

Whisperkit sighed, "Yes, I did. I was determined to believe it wasn't real. But when you said you wanted to ask me something, I had a feeling it was about that dream."

"So what could be the terrible danger? And why did we, out of all other cats, see it?" asked Echokit in a hushed whisper.

"I don't know. But whatever it is, we know what it was about; we were given the dream. I say we wait to see if StarClan sends any signs or dreams to Goldheart or Eveningstar. StarClan's bound to

send signs of danger to the medicine cats," Whisperkit suggested.

"Yeah." replied Echokit distractedly, now becoming really worried that she knew the dream was real, not just a nightmare.

"Just try and push it from your mind, Echokit."

Echokit snorted nervously.

"Come on, let's go," Whisperkit urged. "Cloverkit and Yellowkit are probably wondering where we've gone by now."

"Alright," She sighed and followed her sister back into the camp.

* * *

It had been two sunrises now since Echokit told Whisperkit about the dream. She had tried pushing it from her mind, like her sister had suggested, but always failed. Whenever she was going to sleep or when she saw Whisperkit, the dream always managed to squeeze in and disturb her thoughts.

Sparktail was beginning to spend more and more time away from the camp on patrols and doing warrior duties, as queens did when their kits were apprenticed. But Echokit wanted the comfort of her mother, even though it was acting like a newborn kit to think so. She wanted the carefree days she had when she was younger, without a worry in the world, with the sweet scent of her mother beside her. She wanted to go back in time, to the days when she didn't have to worry about a prophecy or a danger to the Clans.

Every night as Echokit lay in her nest, she heard Whirlheart's ominous voice, always saying the same thing: *'With the whispering voice of two, the forest, as one, will echo with light'*. Whatever Echokit tried, it was always there; she could never get rid of it. Her parents were concerned about her, and Whisperkit had told her to not betray her fear, or else the whole Clan would know something was up, and they didn't want to worry the Clan with the knowledge that they, two kits, had.

Easier said than done, Echokit had thought when Whisperkit told her this. It seemed to Echokit that Whisperkit was having a better time

hiding her fear than she was. Her sister never looked miserable; she always seemed happy. Echokit wished she could do the same.

Echokit shook her head and focused her thoughts on eating her meal in silence. Yellowkit, Cloverkit, Hailkit, and Whisperkit were talking beside her, but Echokit didn't seem to hear them.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!" yowled Eveningstar.

Echokit jerked her head up in surprise. She quickly finished her meal, licked her lips, and padded over to sit beneath the High-stone. Cloverkit, Hailkit, Yellowkit, and Whisperkit followed.

Echokit saw Eveningstar sitting patiently on the High-stone, his tail wrapped neatly around his paws. When every cat was gathered, Eveningstar yowled, "Cats of DawnClan, I know I never mentioned this before, but with all the problems with DayClan, I think you can understand why I never arranged a ceremony properly. But the Clan needs more warriors, and more apprentices to begin with, so Echokit, Whisperkit, come forward. I think it's time you were apprenticed."

Whisperkit stared at Echokit, surprise and excitement shining in her wide, brown eyes. Echokit felt her heart jump. All memories of the prophecy slipped away as Echokit registered what Eveningstar meant. She gazed up at him, and he beckoned them forward with a flick of his tail. As Echokit trotted up to the High-stone, she saw Hailkit, with his jaw dropped in surprise. Echokit passed him and, holding her head and tail high, leapt up onto the High-stone to join Eveningstar, Whisperkit right beside her.

"Whisperkit," the DawnClan leader began, facing Whisperkit, "you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Whisperpaw, and your mentor will be Gravelpelt." Whisperpaw looked shocked, as if she'd just seen all of DayClan, DuskClan, and NightClan coming to attack her.

Eveningstar turned to Gravelpelt as the gray warrior leapt up to join them. "Gravelpelt, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You

received excellent training from Spruceclaw, and you have shown yourself to be loyal and brave. You will be the mentor of Whisperpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her."

Gravelpelt stepped forward and bent down to touch noses with Whisperpaw.

"Whisperpaw! Whisperpaw!" The Clan greeted Whisperpaw by her new name, and Echokit saw Sparktail and Rustypelt bursting with pride.

Eveningstar now turned to Echokit. "Echokit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

Echokit beamed; she felt happier than she had ever felt before, more excited than she had ever been, and more ready than she had ever imagined.

"From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Echopaw. Your mentor will be Bronzepelt." Bronzepelt leapt up onto the boulder and faced his leader. "Bronzepelt, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Ferrettail, and you have shown yourself to be enthusiastic and honest. I expect you to pass on all you know to Echopaw."

Echopaw trotted toward Bronzepelt and eagerly touched noses with him, his eyes gleaming and reflecting her own pride and determination. Echopaw turned to face her Clan, which she was going to protect with her life. She was going to train as a warrior apprentice!

"Echopaw! Echopaw!" the Clan welcomed her. Echopaw gazed down and saw every cat's face, welcoming her as a new apprentice. She looked back up at Bronzepelt, her mentor, who was going to train her as she became the bravest, most loyal warrior there ever was!

Echopaw began to see her life in a whole new way, a life where she found peace and love, not omens and death. A life full of nothing but happiness, and Echopaw was going to train hard to make sure she had that life, as well as every cat in DawnClan, too.

Chapter 6

Echopaw leapt off of the High-stone and watched as her sister bounced after Gravelpelt. Echopaw's stomach started to growl, but she was too excited to eat. She followed her new mentor to the clearing and decided to ask him the question that had been building up inside of her since she found out she was going to be named an apprentice.

"So when do we start training?" she blurted out to Bronzepelt.

"Tomorrow, if you like," he replied, looking down at her at smirking.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, her paws kneading the ground in excitement.

Bronzepelt purred in amusement, "Come on, I'll show you the apprentices' den."

He walked over to the clump of heather bushes where the apprentices' den was; it was in the same clump of bushes as the nursery, Echopaw realized, just further to the right.

"Here it is," meowed Bronzepelt, moving aside so that Echopaw could check it out.

"Wow!" She exclaimed, stepping inside. "And it's all to me and Whisperpaw!"

"Yes, for about three moons, then Cloverkit and Hailkit will be moving in here too," meowed Bronzepelt. Then he turned around, "Here comes Whisperpaw and Gravelpelt now."

"Whisperpaw! Look at the apprentices' den! And it's all to us!" she exclaimed as her sister came closer.

"I know! And we get to sleep here tonight! No more nursery, no more being stuck in camp, and no more little crying kits, even though they are cute," purred Whisperpaw.

Gravelpelt's whiskers twitched with amusement and he meowed, "We'll leave you now. The sun has nearly set." And with that, their mentors turned and padded away toward the warriors' den.

Echopaw took one last look around their new den. While she was walking out, her stomach started growling again and she decided not to ignore it this time. "Come on Whisperpaw, I'm so hungry I could eat a whole fox!"

"Me too. Let's go," Whisperpaw agreed, and they headed to the fresh-kill pile.

Echopaw picked a nice plump mouse and Whisperpaw grabbed a vole for herself. While they were eating, Echopaw saw Hailkit and Cloverkit over by the nursery, looking at them. Cloverkit's eyes were full of longing, but Hailkit glared at them, jealousy burning in his blue eyes. Cloverkit whispered something in her brother's ear, and he looked away from them, nose in the air.

"What's got his tail all tied in a knot?" Whisperpaw meowed, following Echopaw's gaze.

"Us," Echopaw replied bitterly.

"Don't let him ruffle your fur," Whisperpaw soothed, resting her tail on Echopaw's back, "He knew it was going to happen sometime soon. We are nearly three moons older than him. He'll get over it."

"Huh," she grumbled and turned back to her mouse.

"We'd better get to sleep; training starts at dawn!" Whisperpaw meowed enthusiastically.

"Yeah, all right," murmured Echopaw, and she followed her sister to the apprentices' den. She passed her mother and father, who licked each of their heads as they passed. Then they turned and headed for the warriors' den. Whisperpaw turned and dragged Echopaw along, telling her the sun was setting and they had to get to sleep. Echopaw followed her sister until they reached the apprentices' den, and gladly stepped inside.

Echopaw walked into her new den, and Whisperpaw followed her.

She headed to the corner where she gathered up her moss, which was put there by Bronzepelt, and made a soft nest.

She curled up and laid there for a while, wondering why Hailkit had seemed so mad at them. She could understand Cloverkit's sadness; they wouldn't have much time to play with each other anymore. But what had she done to upset Hailkit? It wasn't her fault she was nearly three moons older than him.

She remembered his unusually cold eyes, and it suddenly reminded her of the creature in the vision Whirlheart had shown her. In all the excitement about being made an apprentice, she had momentarily forgotten about the prophecy and the vision. What had the prophecy meant?

'Darkness will veil the sky' was the first part, which made sense to Echopaw: a darkness, a danger, was coming. *'But with the whispering voice of two'*, the second part, confused Echopaw. Whispering voice of what two? And the *'The forest as one will echo with light'* part seemed to Echopaw that the forest would be united, as one, but how could it echo with light?

Echopaw shook her head and sighed. Her head hurt every time she tried to riddle it out.

Whisperpaw hadn't mentioned it since that day they spoke about it in the dirtplace tunnel. Echopaw decided she would remember to ask Whisperpaw if she had figured anything out after their training tomorrow.

Echopaw rolled over and looked outside. The moon was shrinking from the full moon by the day, and the stars were glittering brightly and Silverpelt shone brighter than normal.

It looks like StarClan is watching over me, Echopaw thought. *Are they?*

She sat up and walked over to the den entrance and prayed, *Please, StarClan, show me something, anything, that will help me figure out what danger is threatening my Clan. Help me figure out what the terrible prophecy means; guide my pawsteps in the right direction so I may protect my Clan. Let me know that you are up there right now, watching*

over me.

As she finished, she saw a shooting star fly past in the sky, right through Silverpelt, shining almost as bright as the moon. She knew then that StarClan was watching her, protecting her. She knew that, for now, she was safe in their paws, and when the danger came, they would help her protect her Clan.

Yawning, she turned back into the den and heard Whisperpaw's slow, steady breathing of sleep. Echopaw murmured to her, "Don't worry, StarClan is watching over us. We are safe in their paws." Then she curled up in her nest and fell asleep almost instantly.

* * *

Echopaw was in the forest. She smelled a mouse and dropped into the hunting crouch. In a few heartbeats, she would have a nice meal to take home to her Clan. She rocked her haunches and prepared to pounce.

"Raykit! Away from there!" A voice shouted, and Echopaw recognized it at once. It was Sagetail.

Then suddenly someone stepped on her. Echopaw was jerked awake by Whisperpaw's paw on her stomach. Whisperpaw didn't seem to notice she had stepped on her, because she kept running out the entrance to the den.

"Raykit! I said no!" came Sagetail's urgent meow.

Echopaw realized that Sagetail's voice wasn't in her dream; it was actually happening. Echopaw scrambled to her paws and raced after Whisperpaw.

Once out of the apprentices' den, she saw that Raykit was trying to climb the High-stone. Sagetail was all the way across the camp, running as fast as she could from the nursery.

Raykit's paws slipped. His claws furiously scraped the boulder's side as he tried to find a grip.

"Raykit!" Sagetail yowled, sprinting faster.

Bronzepelt had heard the yowling, and raced to the High-stone, ready to catch Raykit. Raykit's claws lost hold and he fell, wailing in terror. Bronzepelt reared on his hind legs and clamped his jaws over the scruff of Raykit's neck.

The red warrior set Raykit down, whose eyes were as big as the moon. Sagetail panted as she reached her kit, her own eyes wide with anger and relief.

"Raykit!" she scolded sternly, "I told you no! Lucky Father was fast enough to catch you, or you would have broken something for sure."

Raykit managed to squeal, "S-Sorry."

Sagetail's eyes suddenly softened and she started licking Raykit's ruffled fur. "Oh, you're alright, and that's what matters."

Echopaw blinked in awe and trotted up to Raykit, Sagetail, and Bronzepelt. Whisperpaw approached too, followed by Goldheart

"Oh, Goldheart, Raykit is alright, just a little shocked," meowed Sagetail as she saw the two medicine cats.

"Which is why I came," replied Goldheart. "We have poppy seeds for him; they will help calm him down. They will also make him sleepy, so you'll need to take him back to the nursery to rest."

"Oh thank you," meowed Sagetail, looking relieved.

Goldheart nodded. "Here they are," he meowed, shaking a few poppy seeds out of the poppy flower.

"Here, Raykit, eat these," Sagetail murmured soothingly to Raykit, whose eyes were still wide and whose breathing was still fast.

Raykit lapped up the seeds and, once he was done, Sagetail grabbed the scruff of his neck. She nodded her thanks to the rest of them, rubbed her muzzle against Bronzepelt's cheek, then padded back to the nursery with her kit.

Echopaw looked around and realized that the commotion seemed to

have woken up the rest of the Clan too. She saw Creekfall and Meadowheart peering out of the warriors' den, looking curious. Then she saw Twigfoot coming out too, murmuring something to Prairiefoot, Rustypelt, and Sparktail, who were following him.

Echopaw blinked then padded over to Bronzepelt a tail-length away. "Nice catch! Lucky you caught him!" she exclaimed to her mentor.

"Thanks," replied Bronzepelt quietly, then, after a pause, he meowed, "Well, we had better start today's training. We will be taking a tour of our territory today."

"Yay!" she yowled. "What are Gravelpelt and Whisperpaw doing?"

"They're coming with us," replied Bronzepelt.

"Double yay!" she exclaimed.

Bronzepelt purred with amusement. "We'd better eat before we leave. It looks like Whisperpaw and Gravelpelt are already doing that."

Echopaw followed her mentor to the fresh-kill log and sat by Whisperpaw. She searched the pile and found a blackbird for herself. It was extra tasty, especially since it was the meal she was eating before her first day of training.

When all four cats had finished eating, Gravelpelt meowed, "I think we'd better go now. The sun's already all the way off the horizon."

Echopaw looked up and saw he was right. It was a nice sunny day with a few clouds and a warm breeze, the perfect day for training.

"Yes, let's go," agreed Bronzepelt, looking up at the sky as well.

As they left, they saw the dawn patrol leaving just in front of them, which turned left after reaching the bramble bushes at the entrance to the camp.

"Are we going the same way as the dawn patrol?" Whisperpaw asked as they approached the bramble bushes as well.

"No, we don't want to interfere with the patrol. We'll be going to the right," Bronzepelt replied.

Echopaw was so close to the entrance of the camp. She had often gazed out from right here with Whisperpaw when they were kits, waiting and waiting for the day when they'd finally go out as apprentices. Now they were going!

As they left the camp, Echopaw paused and took a deep breath, taking it all in. Then she raced after her mentor and out into the woods, further and further from the camp.

"This is the Great Pine, the tallest tree in our territory," meowed Gravelpelt, gazing up at a pine tree that towered far above the four cats. It looked as if it could touch the clouds. Echopaw stared up at its branches, which were almost as big as the trunk of the tree next to it. Echopaw gaped at it in awe.

"Echopaw!" called Bronzepelt. He sounded amused. "Come on, there's lots more to be seen."

"Coming!" Echopaw replied, and she raced after them.

"Over here is the stream. It's not that far from camp, so it's where we drink and find fresh moss," meowed Bronzepelt. Echopaw saw the small stream, about two fox-lengths wide, and not too deep. Reeds grew around it, as well as a patch of wildflowers and small clumps of ferns and blooming briar. Butterflies and bees flew around the flowers, and dragonflies buzzed by the stream. It was beautiful.

She turned and saw a clump of small, dusky brown plants that looked very strange and round. She sniffed them and recoiled. They smelled strange, too. "What are these?" she asked her mentor, wrinkling her nose.

Bronzepelt looked panicked and meowed, "Did you eat any?"

Echopaw backed up, "N-No," she stuttered.

Bronzepelt relaxed and sighed. "Good. They're called mushrooms. Some are poisonous. Don't eat them. No cat has died recently from

them, but we still have to be careful."

Echopaw nodded, understanding, and walked over closer to the stream.

She stooped down and took a drink; it was cold and refreshing on her tongue and cooled her throat as she swallowed it. Echopaw felt re-energized after lapping up the stream's cool water and bounced around, trying to catch a few butterflies. The two warriors purred with amusement and Whisperpaw rolled over, laughing. Echopaw got up and playfully swiped her paw at Whisperpaw.

"Come on," meowed Bronzepelt through laughs, "We've still got to go through the rest of our territory. We don't have any more time to chase butterflies; that's what kits do."

Echopaw stopped immediately and meowed, "Sorry, let's keep going." Echopaw didn't know what had gotten into her. She was not a kit anymore; she was an apprentice. So she needed to start acting like one.

Echopaw shook her head and focused on following the two warriors and trying to remember DawnClan territory as best as she could. *So first, there's the Great Pine, then we come to the stream, and then we cross the log to get over the stream...*

She recited it in her head as they walked over the log-bridge, her claws unsheathed so she wouldn't slip and fall. After walking over the log-bridge, the two warriors led Echopaw and Whisperpaw through the forest and, eventually, it thinned out. It led to a meadow that turned into a large grassy moor. A river weaved its way through the meadow, which was about ten to fifteen fox-lengths wide, and it looked like its current was pretty fast. This definitely wasn't a place any cat would want to mess around.

As the breeze blew from the moorland, across the river, and over to the group of them, Echopaw smelled something strange but familiar. The scent was of many cats, but a cat-scent she'd never smelled before. She realized that it must be one of the other Clans.

Whisperpaw must have realized this too, because she looked up at

Gravelpelt and asked, "Which Clan is this?"

"It's DayClan. That river is the border between our territory and theirs," he replied, glancing around and sniffing the air.

Echopaw suddenly remembered something, "Is this where DayClan attacked Aspenleaf and the rest of the patrol?" she asked.

Bronzepelt nodded solemnly.

"Those fox-hearted prey-stealers!" Echopaw exclaimed, anger rising in her chest.

"What's good is that we haven't scented or seen them on our territory since that incident," meowed Gravelpelt.

"They've learned not to mess with us!" hissed Whisperpaw triumphantly.

Gravelpelt and Bronzepelt exchanged a solemn glance.

"Let's move on," muttered Bronzepelt bitterly.

The four of them turned and continued on their tour, heading downstream.

After a while the forest started to get thicker again, andthe meadow disappeared. As they walked on, Echopaw heard a distant roaring, like the sound of thunder. She looked up and saw that the sky was clear. What was that noise? Then, she saw something big race past through the trees up ahead and she heard the same roaring she had heard a moment ago. She sniffed the air when a breeze blew towards them and instantly regretted it. A horrible stench filled her nose and she bared her teeth and shook her head to try and get rid of it.

"What is that horrible smell?" she meowed once it had gone away. She saw that Whisperpaw must have smelled it too, because her nose was wrinkled up in disgust. But she noticed that Gravelpelt and Bronzepelt weren't reacting as bad to the stench as her and her sister were; they must have smelled it before.

"It was the Thunderpath, it's a sort of path made by Twolegs," Gravelpelt replied, wrinkling up his nose as well.

As they got closer to the Thunderpath, the stench became more and more horrible.

"Stop, shhh," hissed Bronzepelt as they came within three fox-lengths of the Thunderpath. He peered through the tall grass that grew on the side of it. "Okay," he finally whispered, "Peek through, but stay back!" he warned the apprentices.

Echopaw slowly pushed through the grass and saw the Thunderpath. It looked like a straight black river, without any of the water. The stench was by far the worst right here. She soon couldn't stand it and backed away through the grass again. She gladly breathed in the fresher air that was around her. She was about to ask if they would see whatever had made the roaring noise earlier when she heard it, like thunder, again. She eagerly pushed her way back through the grass and stayed hidden in it, as Bronzepelt had ordered.

The roaring became louder and louder, and soon her ears couldn't bear it anymore. She angled them away from the noise, crouching down low, and tried to get a glimpse of the creature. Then she saw it in the distance. The first thing she glimpsed were two bright yellow eyes, then, as it raced closer, she saw that it had horrible, giant paws that propelled it faster than any cat. It was coming closer, closer, closer. Echopaw was sure she was going to be hit by it, but before she could back up, it had already sped past and, as it did, a gust of wind nearly knocked her off her paws. With the gust, dust flew up and Echopaw had to close her eyes and turn away while the stench filled her nose once more. When it ended, she looked over to see if the creature was still there, but it was already gone.

Echopaw backed out of the grass and shook her pelt, freeing it from the dust sprayed up by the creature, Whisperpaw behind her.

"What was that?" Echopaw and Whisperpaw asked at the same time.

"That," meowed Gravelpelt, "was a monster. They race all over the

Thunderpath. Although they usually stay on the Thunderpath, you still have to be careful when near it because sometimes they stray from it and you could get seriously injured or killed. The monsters let Twolegs ride in their belly and take them wherever they want to go."

"Why would they let Twolegs ride in their bellies? I wouldn't!" Echopaw asked, disgusted.

Gravelpelt shrugged. "I have no idea. Anything that has to do with Twolegs doesn't make sense."

Bronzepelt nodded, agreeing, then asked Echopaw and Whisperpaw, "Do you notice any other smell besides the Thunderpath?"

Both apprentices sniffed the air and shook their heads. All Echopaw could smell was the horrid smell of the Thunderpath and the monsters that sped past on it.

"Well, I didn't expect you to," meowed Bronzepelt, "But on the other side of the Thunderpath, to the left, is NightClan. And to the right, where the river divides the forest on the other side of the Thunderpath, is DuskClan. We don't share a border with DuskClan. You most likely won't get a whiff of either of those two Clans until you go to your first Gathering, unless the wind is blowing just right."

Echopaw nodded and gazed around her. She took it all in and recited which Clans lived where. She stared at NightClan's territory, then DuskClan's, then DayClan's. As she gazed across DayClan's grassland, she saw a tall, pointed, rocky mountain, with low fog-like clouds billowing around it. It was relatively close, probably on the edge of DayClan's territory. But it was nothing compared to the mountains behind it. On the horizon, mountains bigger than anything she could ever imagine rose up through the clouds. The tallest peaks had hard, rocky, and jagged slopes, looking deadly. The lower portion didn't have a rocky face, but were covered in pine trees, like moss covering a boulder. She couldn't believe how big those mountains were, and at the tip tops, they were covered in white.

"Is that the Pointed Mountain?" asked Whisperpaw, gazing at the smaller, rock-faced mountain.

"Yes, it's on the edge of DayClan territory. On the night of the Gathering each full moon, DayClan allows all the Clans to travel on the edge of their territory to get to the Pointed Mountain, as long as they don't hunt or move deeper into their territory more than a few fox-lengths."

"Wow! And what's the white at the top of those huge mountains?" Echopaw.

"That's snow," Gravelpelt replied, amused.

"Oh! I remember snow, kind of. We saw it when we were kits, remember Echopaw?" Whisperpaw exclaimed.

"Not really. But I thought snow only fell during leaf-bare and when it was really, really cold," Echopaw meowed, confused.

"Yes, but not on mountains; it's always cold up there. So it's nearly always covered in snow."

"But how does anything live up there?"

"They get used to it, I guess." Gravelpelt shrugged.

"Come on," meowed Bronzepelt, "Let's get going. We'll follow the Thunderpath back to camp.

As Echopaw thought of the Pointed Mountain and Gatherings, she remembered that every apprentice had to travel to the Moonfall before becoming a warrior. "Where's the Moonfall?"

"Oh, you can't see that from here. It's a little further from the Pointed Mountain and in a cave in a mountain. You'll travel there someday. Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail went there a few moons ago, when you were too young to hear that they had," Bronzepelt purred with amusement.

"Wow," meowed Echopaw. She looked back at the mountains behind her every now and then as they walked along the

Thunderpath and back to camp. Then she looked up at the sun, and realized that it was already way past sunhigh. There were clouds building up in the distance, rolling and climbing the sky. Echopaw shivered; the mountains sure looked treacherous.

As Echopaw gazed at the rugged peaks of the snow-capped mountains, she wondered what it'd be like to go there, exploring way beyond the Clan territories. *I don't suppose I'll ever go there,* Echopaw realized. *It's too far, and I'd never want to leave my Clan.*

Echopaw sighed and followed her Clanmates, casting one last glance through the trees at the mountains before turning around to head back to camp.

Chapter 7

Two and a half moons had passed since Echopaw's and Whisperpaw's first tour of the territory, and the two of them were coming along well as apprentices; they had just finished a hunting lesson with their mentors and were on their way back to the camp.

Green-leaf had officially arrived, bringing the daily warmth with it. Hunting patrols seemed to be bringing back more and more prey each day, and there seemed to be no more trouble from DayClan, not since the day Aspenleaf had been wounded. The young warrior was still in Goldheart's den; she would have been out a moon ago, but her wound had started to become infected, so Goldheart had ordered her to stay with him for a while longer until he was absolutely sure that she was healed.

Yellowkit had finally become apprenticed yesterday, even though she wasn't six moons old yet; Goldheart had wanted to start her training early, and having Aspenleaf in the medicine cats' den would give Yellowpaw some good practice and help her learn faster.

Echopaw shook her head to clear her thoughts and followed Gravelpelt, Bronzepelt, and Whisperpaw into the camp.

Bronzepelt turned to the apprentices. "You two, go fetch the elders some fresh-kill, then you can get some rest. It looks like we won't we doing much more today; the clouds are coming in, and they may be bringing a storm with them."

Echopaw and Whisperpaw dipped their head to the red-furred warrior and trotted across the clearing to the fresh-kill pile. Echopaw grabbed a blue jay and a vole, and Whisperpaw picked out two mice. The two sisters pushed their way through the pine branches of the elders' den and found Spruceclaw and Ferrettail sharing tongues, while Fogtail slept in the corner.

Ferrettail looked up at the two apprentices. "Oh, is all that for us?"

he asked.

Echopaw dipped her head and set the vole and blue jay down. Whisperpaw dropped the two mice she was carrying beside the prey Echopaw had brought.

"Did you two catch any of those?" asked Spruceclaw.

Echopaw shook her head slowly, staring at her paws. "No... We haven't actually caught our first prey yet."

"Don't worry; you'll get there soon enough," Spruceclaw meowed gently, his brown eyes encouraging.

Echopaw smiled and nodded. Whisperpaw dipped her head to the two elders, then lead the way out of the den, and Echopaw followed.

As soon as they crossed the clearing, Echopaw noticed the clouds Bronzepelt had been talking about. They were giant, puffy, and gray, and they were climbing higher and higher into the sky, while creeping closer and closer to the forest. A shadow swept across the camp as the clouds blotted out the sun, and a cool breeze began to stir the bushes around the camp. The grasses of the clearing bent over, and the trees began to sway as the strength of the breeze heightened.

Echopaw shivered and stared around the camp. Eveningstar, Twigfoot, Sunfur, Copperleaf, and Sparktail were deep in conversation, but when the wind buffeted their pelts, they all gazed up the graying sky and broke apart, each heading to different parts of the camp.

Sparktail padded towards Echopaw and Whisperpaw, lashing her tail and flattening her ears. "Eveningstar has just told us that a big storm is on its way, so finish up your apprentice duties, then get into your den as soon as you can."

Echopaw nodded and stared up at the clouds again.

"Those clouds signal a coming thunderstorm, with pouring rain, cold winds, and sometimes even hail. It's dangerous for a cat to be

out in a thunderstorm, especially if it's hailing, so there's not going to be an evening patrol; Eveningstar doesn't want to risk cats getting hurt." Sparktail sighed. "You'd better get to your dens."

Echopaw and Whisperpaw nodded, exchanging a glance, then they turned to stare at the expanding clouds again.

Sparktail nodded and meowed, "Well, I'd better help tell the elders."

Echopaw watched her mother go, then turned to Whisperpaw. "We should get some fresh-kill, then head to the den."

Whisperpaw nodded.

As they crossed the clearing, a darker shadow engulfed the camp, and Echopaw looked up. The clouds were nearly upon them, and they had blotted out almost the entire sky. Then, out of nowhere, a huge gust of wind ripped through the camp, and Echopaw let out a hiss of surprise.

Whisperpaw dashed to the fresh-kill pile, grabbed two birds, then raced to the apprentices' den, Echopaw on her tail.

The wind lulled for a few heartbeats, and Echopaw glanced around to see Creekfall helping Aspenleaf into the medicine cats' den, while Goldheart followed them. Rustypelt and Sparktail meowed something to Whisperpaw, who nodded and raced off to help Raykit, who was struggling to move in the gusting wind. Sagetail was helping Eveningstar get the elders into the den and then ran to help Whisperpaw get Raykit into the nursery. Meadowheart, Eaglefeather, and Sparrowtail had just finished dividing up the fresh-kill they had caught, and they raced into the warriors' den.

Echopaw turned and saw Whisperpaw calling to her from inside the apprentices' den. Echopaw couldn't hear what she was saying; the wind carried her sister's voice away. But Echopaw guessed Whisperpaw was telling her to hurry up and get inside, so Echopaw ran toward her, fighting the raging wind.

"Some storm!" called Whisperpaw, her voice sounding like a whisper compared to the howling of the wind.

"I know!" yowled Echopaw over the gusts. "And it came out of nowhere! It was nice and warm earlier when we were training!"

"Yeah, it's weird," replied Whisperpaw, turning around to their nests.

Once deeper into the den, it became warmer and wasn't as loud. Echopaw shook off to try and rid her pelt of the cold and dust. She could still hear the howling of the wind above her and the creaking of the trees swaying.

Then suddenly the den lit up and blinded Echopaw. Then it was dark again. Echopaw was about to ask what it was, when her voice was drowned out by a deafening roar that shook the whole forest and echoed off the trees, chilling Echopaw to the bone. She cowered against the side of the den. Then as soon as it had started, the rumbling stopped.

"That m-must have been lightning and thunder," Echopaw stuttered, feeling her bristling fur quiver as she looked at Whisperpaw.

Whisperpaw nodded stiffly, then she pricked up her ears as a pounding filled the air, loud in the lull of the thunder.

Echopaw peered through the growing darkness outside and saw streaks fly past. "Rain?" Echopaw asked, squinting.

"No... it's too loud to be rain," Whisperpaw murmured.

Echopaw padded cautiously to the entrance of the den. Something bounced inside, landing by her paws. Echopaw sniffed. Ice? Ice falling from the sky? "This must be the hail Sparktail mentioned. It's falling ice!" Echopaw exclaimed.

The hail looked about as big as a ladybug, and sounded peaceful. Echopaw turned back toward Whisperpaw and saw that she was looking up at the roof of the den, because every now and then, a tiny piece of hail would fall right through the top of the bush.

Then the sound started getting louder. Echopaw turned back to the entrance of the den and peered outside. The hail was getting bigger, and bigger. It was now almost as big as a snail shell. There were so

much falling from the sky and it became nearly deafening. Echopaw prayed to StarClan that, with hail this big, the dens wouldn't collapse and that every cat would be safe.

There was another flash of lightning outside. Echopaw was prepared this time when the thunder crackled and boomed overhead, but it was still just as loud and bone-chilling as the first. Only a second later, another flash of lightning lit up the sky, a jagged line that seemed to be right in front of her. It split the sky and was so bright that Echopaw had to close her eyes. Then the clap of thunder ripped open the silence and overpowered the pounding of the rain and hail, so loud that Echopaw thought the whole world was about to explode and burn up from this one bolt of lightning. Then, as soon as it had started, the thunder had stopped.

All Echopaw could hear was the steady pounding of the rain and hail, and the howling of the wind in the trees.

Whisperpaw pressed up against her, gazing at the storm with wonder and fear.

No more lightning and thunder hit the forest, and the hail began to let up. The worst of the storm must have passed.

"Let's get to bed," Whisperpaw yawned.

Echopaw followed her sister to their nests and curled up beside her sister, closing her eyes.

Echopaw lay awake for a while, thinking about the storm and the danger it had possessed. Echopaw's heart skipped a beat as she thought of danger. The prophecy had spoken of some danger; could the darkness it would bring be worse than a thunderstorm?

Chapter 8

When Echopaw woke up, the sky was gray and the rain still pounded the ground, where it was now one big puddle. Echopaw heard the light and steady pounding of rain, and she yawned.

Whisperpaw was already awake and had left her nest. Echopaw looked around and saw her padding toward her with the two birds they'd brought into their dens last night.

Whisperpaw dropped one by Echopaw. "Here."

Echopaw smiled and replied, "Thanks."

Echopaw glanced outside at the steady drum of rain. It looked as if it had let up enough to actually leave the den. Echopaw watched the ripples run across the surface of the puddles as the raindrops hit them.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" meowed Whisperpaw, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, I'm glad the lightning and thunder is gone though," Echopaw replied.

Whisperpaw nodded in agreement. "I bet we can go outside now. Want to see if anyone else is out of their dens yet?"

Echopaw nodded and peered outside the den. The thin sheets of rain blurred her view, but she caught sight of Yellowpaw, Cloverkit, and Hailkit playing in the puddles, their fur soaked through.

Echopaw shared a glance with Whisperpaw, then the two padded out into the rain. Echopaw shivered at the wet sensation; it felt cold but refreshing in her fur. She jogged through the rain and sprayed up water as she did. She stopped at the puddle and was about to jump in it when she was sprayed by a wave of water. She turned around and saw Hailkit rolling around in the mud, roaring with laughter. She was about to hiss at him and tell him to look at what

he had done to her fur; but she realized how funny she must look. She burst out laughing instead and sprayed water back at Hailkit. He stopped laughing and started coughing up water that Echopaw had sprayed at him. He got up and raced at her and tackled her to the ground. They tussled through the mud, water spraying everywhere.

Echopaw shoved him off with a huff and sat up, shaking her pelt and sending water and mud flying.

Hailkit let out a squeal. "Hey! Watch it!" he laughed.

Echopaw flicked him with her tail, then licked her paw and drew it over her ear.

"How'd you sleep?" Hailkit asked after a pause.

Echopaw continued to clean her ears. "Fine. What about you?"

Hailkit shrugged. "Pretty good."

There was a silence.

Hailkit sighed. "It's weird, we're not going to have time like this any longer. We haven't for the past two moons, really. I mean, with you being an apprentice and all..." he trailed off.

"What are you talking about?" Echopaw asked, and she stopped cleaning her ears. "In a half moon you'll be an apprentice too! Then we can spend time together. We'll get to go hunting together, go on patrols together—"

"Yeah, but after that, we'll have to take care of the elders and get them fresh bedding, so we can't just play like we used to," Hailkit interrupted.

"Oh, stop being so negative! We'll have those times, don't worry. We'll always be able to spend time together, especially when we become warriors."

He blinked. "Yeah, I guess I am being a bit too negative."

Suddenly Cloverkit let out a yowl. "Look! A rainbow!"

Hailkit and Echopaw immediately looked toward where Cloverkit had pointed. A bright rainbow shone above the trees, signalling the end of the storm. Echopaw turned around and saw the sun, poking its way through the clouds; its rays shone right on the clearing in the middle of the camp. It was already sunhigh, Echopaw realized. Echopaw looked around; the rain had finally stopped, and the clouds were moving away. Blue sky replaced the gray one that had hovered above them earlier.

"The storm is over!" Yellowpaw yowled.

Cats who weren't already outside started peeking out of their dens.

Eveningstar stood up from where he was sitting with Rustypelt and Twigfoot, then leapt up onto the High-stone and waited for every cat to be gathered in the clearing. "Cats of DawnClan! The storm is over and we must take a patrol around our borders to renew the scent-markings and to see how the territory is after this rain. Most of it will be puddles, but the river might have flooded. Meadowheart, you can lead one around to the DayClan border, and Rustypelt, you can lead one to the NightClan border. Sparktail, Creekfall, I need you to each lead a hunting patrol; our fresh-kill pile is dwindling. I can't guarantee you'll find any prey though, the rain will have driven it into hiding, but we need to try. The rest of you, help clean up the camp; twigs and a bunch of leaves fell from the trees when the hail hit." he finished. All the cats nodded to Eveningstar and got to work.

Echopaw saw Bronzepelt padding toward her. "Meadowheart wants me to go on the patrol to the DayClan border, and I thought I should bring you," he meowed.

"Yay!" squealed Echopaw. "Who else is coming?"

"Just you, me, Meadowheart, and Prairiefoot."

Echopaw nodded and started to walk toward Meadowheart, Bronzepelt following her.

Meadowheart called, "Come on! We must get going!"

Echopaw looked around and saw Hailkit staring at her, looking sad. She bounded over to him and meowed, "Come on, stop pouting. I'll be back soon, I am an apprentice, you know."

Hailkit licked her head then meowed, "Just be careful." Then he turned away and padded over toward Moonshine and Cloverkit, leaving Echopaw by herself. She felt her pelt growing warm and turned to follow Bronzepelt and the rest of the patrol out of camp.

As they left the camp, Echopaw didn't pay attention to what she was supposed to be doing, she was wondering why Hailkit felt so attached to her all of a sudden. He seemed to always be worried about her.

We're friends, and we have always been friends, so that's probably why he fears for my safety, just like Whisperpaw, Cloverkit, Yellowpaw, and all my friends would.

Echopaw shook her head and tried to focus on the patrol. They had just reached the stream, which was at least three times as big as usual, and Meadowheart lead them across the log and to the other side. Echopaw's claws gripped the log firmly as she crossed, and she slowly crept along its surface, hoping not to slip. When she reached the end, she slowly stood up and jumped off the log, landing safely on the other side. After all four cats made it across the stream, they continued to walk through the rain-soaked forest, looking for important things they might have to report.

They continued walking, and Echopaw continued to take in all the beauty of the wet forest. Then Meadowheart stopped so suddenly that Echopaw nearly ran into Prairiefoot in front of her. Echopaw looked up to see what the problem was, and, as she did, she realized why Meadowheart had stopped so abruptly.

The river's banks had overflowed many fox-lengths into the forest. It had rained so much that the meadow was filled with a layer of water and looked like a marshland. Echopaw looked around and saw that it was much worse over in DayClan's territory.

If DayClan had said they'd had a hard time feeding their Clan before the storm, they would definitely have a hard time now.

"We'll have to report this immediately to Eveningstar," Bronzepelt spoke, breaking the silence.

"We will. But first we should follow the river toward NightClan territory to see how much it has flooded over there," meowed Meadowheart.

"But isn't Rustypelt leading a patrol on the NightClan border?" Echopaw asked.

"Well, yes," replied Meadowheart, "But it doesn't hurt to check it out. I want to see for myself how much this flood has spread."

"I agree with Meadowheart," Prairiefoot meowed. "Let's just check it out. I want to see the flood's damage too."

With that, the patrol headed along the banks of the overflowing river and toward the Thunderpath. Echopaw kept glancing around, looking for the other patrol, but couldn't find any sign of them.

Echopaw noticed that the river was rushing faster, and was much stronger than usual. The birds didn't sing as much here, and the usual sounds and smells of prey weren't present either. Echopaw sniffed the air again, and realized that the forest didn't smell the same; the storm had blotted out the normal smell of the forest.

Echopaw was surprised when she saw they had neared the Thunderpath. She didn't smell it first, like she usually did. This time, she heard the monsters first.

The rain must have covered up the stench of the Thunderpath as well, thought Echopaw.

Only when they got closer did she begin to smell it, and although it wasn't as strong, it was still just as revolting. Echopaw wrinkled up her nose in disgust and continued to follow Bronzepelt, Meadowheart, and Prairiefoot towards the NightClan border. When they reached it, Echopaw heard the distant sound of a monster speeding along the Thunderpath, and pricked her ears to listen. She

poked her head through the grass growing alongside the Thunderpath and saw the monster speeding toward her. But, before she could back away, the monster ran straight through a puddle and sprayed her with gravel and rubbish-filled water as it sped off into the distance.

Great, she growled to herself. *Now I'm going to be licking this off my fur for the next moon.*

"What happened?" asked Bronzepelt as she came back out of the grass.

"A monster sprayed me with mud as it sped past me," she replied sourly.

"Well, that's Twolegs for you," he meowed, and Echopaw thought she heard amusement in his voice.

She scowled at him and shook her pelt, trying to free it of mud and gravel. Then she padded over to Meadowheart, who was looking at the river flowing under the Thunderpath. It was rushing by so fast that the water was almost all white. Its currents violently dragged leaves and sticks under as they cleared the tunnel under the Thunderpath. Echopaw was astonished; the river was flowing faster than she could have ever imagined water could go.

"You do not want to fall into the river right now," meowed Prairiefoot, gazing at the rushing water with wide eyes.

"You don't want to fall into the river ever," meowed a voice behind them. They turned around to find Rustypelt and his patrol emerging from the cover of the forest and heading toward them.

"That's true," replied Meadowheart.

"How's the flood on the NightClan border?" Bronzepelt asked Rustypelt.

"Not too bad. The Thunderpath isn't flooded, but the river is pretty flooded on NightClan's territory," Rustypelt meowed.

Bronzepelt nodded. "Then I think DayClan has it the worst. The

river is really flooded on the border; the water is reaching all the way into the forest and the meadow now looks like a lake. But the moorland looks like a complete swamp," he meowed.

"Great," muttered Sparrowtail bitterly, who was on Rustypelt's patrol. "Now DayClan has another reason to try and take our territory. It was all peaceful and then this storm had to come along! Now DayClan definitely won't have enough prey, with the flood and the Twolegs combined! They'll try and steal our territory again."

"Well, maybe the flood has scared the Twolegs away, and maybe the flood isn't too bad deeper into their territory..." meowed Echopaw, trying to sound hopeful, but she trailed off, knowing that what Sparrowtail said was probably right.

"I doubt it," sighed Rustypelt, his gray-brown tabby fur bristled. "After the flood has cleared, they'll be back for us and our territory. Mark my words."

* * *

When the two patrols reached the camp again, Meadowheart and Rustypelt immediately went to report the flooding to Eveningstar. Echopaw looked around and saw Creekfall and Sparktail returning with their hunting patrols. Sparktail had one mouse and a small vole and Creekfall had a sparrow. Both patrols hung their heads as they walked into the camp. They gave what they had to Sagetail and the elders.

"Is that all you caught?" Echopaw asked as Creekfall passed her.

"Yes," meowed Creekfall half-heartedly.

"But when I went on the patrol, we heard birds singing in the trees, and—"

"Yeah, well the problem with that is they're in the trees," hissed Creekfall. "You try and catch one then, if you think it's so easy and simple." He turned his back on her and walked away.

"Don't let him bother you," meowed Sparktail, padding up to her. "He was a bit angry the whole time. I think he thinks he's letting his

Clan, and Aspenleaf, down by not bringing back anything but a small sparrow."

"Is this what it's like during leaf-bare?" asked Echopaw.

"Similar," she replied. "The hunting is a bit easier than this, but every other factor of leaf-bare makes it the hardest season to live in. Leaf-bare brings snow, and that causes the stream and river to freeze over. It also brings whitecough, and sometimes greencough."

"Oh, I hope this leaf-bare is not too bad," Echopaw meowed.

Sparktail nodded, looked around, then turned back to Echopaw and meowed with amusement in her voice, "I'll leave you here, then."

Echopaw looked around to see what Sparktail had been looking at. It was Hailkit; he had been staring at her, waiting to talk to her. When Hailkit saw Sparktail leaving, he leapt to his paws and trotted over to Echopaw.

"Wow, why are you all muddy? Did you fall in the river?" asked Hailkit, sounding like he was about to burst out laughing.

"No, a monster sprayed me with mud and gravel as it passed me on the Thunderpath," she replied, looking down at her wet fur. She stood up and shook it off, flinging muddy droplets at Hailkit.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, backing away.

Echopaw stopped and murmured, "Sorry," and started to lick her fur clean.

Hailkit blinked. "I heard that the river is really flooded," he meowed.

"Yes, it was very, very wide; you couldn't even see the meadow where it normally flows through. And it was rushing really, really fast, and it looked deadly," Echopaw told him.

Hailkit blinked, eyes wide.

"Hailkit!" a voice called. It was Moonshine.

"I'd better go," Hailkit sighed.

Echopaw watched him go, then turned around and headed toward the apprentices' den. Whisperpaw was curled up in her nest, and she looked up when Echopaw entered. A thought appeared in Echopaw's mind, and she remembered that she wanted to ask Whisperpaw about the prophecy. She seized her chance. "Whisperpaw, a few nights ago, I was awake for a long time, thinking about the prophecy's meaning, and I realized how confusing it is; other than the 'Darkness will veil the sky part', I don't have a single idea what it's about. Do you?"

"Well, I have an idea, but it's just an idea," Whisperpaw meowed and sat up slowly. "I... well, I think that when it says *'whispering voice of two'*, the 'two' is referring to two cats." She paused.

Echopaw nodded. It made sense. What else would the 'two' be referring to?

Whisperpaw spoke again. "And... and maybe the Clans will become one, become united. That would be *'the forest, as one'* part. And... *'echo with light'*... echo with... hope? I don't know. Those are my only ideas," sighed Whisperpaw, and she shrugged.

Echopaw digested all of this and sat in thought. Whisperpaw's ideas did make sense. How hadn't Echopaw thought of that? But which two cats was it referring to?

An idea suddenly went off in Echopaw's head like lightning, and her mind whirled. It couldn't be! Just couldn't. But she knew she had figured it out.

"Echopaw, are you okay? You look like you're going to be sick," Whisperpaw asked.

Echopaw hadn't heard her. When she spoke, it was barely above a whisper. "Don't you think it's a bit weird that us two get the dream and prophecy, when Goldheart, the medicine cat, didn't? If he had, he would have told Eveningstar. I know he hasn't had it, Whisperpaw, not yet at least. We were shown the dream, because... because we are the Two, Whisperpaw. We are the cats in the

prophecy."

Chapter 9

"So how in StarClan's name are *we* supposed to save the Clans? We're only apprentices!" asked Whisperpaw in a hushed voice.

Echopaw and Whisperpaw were out collecting fresh moss for the elders by the stream. Because of the overflowing river, they weren't allowed to go training until the banks of the flood lowered. So, they had spent their last days learning how to wring out the fresh moss and how to check the elders for ticks with Goldheart. As part of the job, they would also bring the elders fresh-kill when they brought the moss. This was the only part about being an apprentice that Echopaw didn't like. They would be doing it until they became warriors; it was an apprentice duty, so, inevitably, they had to do it.

It was way past sunhigh, and, with how busy they had been, Echopaw and Whisperpaw hadn't even seen half the Clan at all that day.

Echopaw sighed. "I don't know. StarClan has gone crazy, thinking that *we* can save the Clans," Echopaw replied, digging up another patch of moss.

"No, they haven't; StarClan had a purpose for sending both of us that vision. *They* believe we have the power to save the Clans when the danger comes, but *I* don't see how we can. Maybe StarClan will send Whirlheart again..." Whisperpaw trailed off.

Echopaw gathered up her moss and meowed, "We should go. We've been gone a while; the whole Clan will be out searching for us if we don't hurry and get back to camp."

Whisperpaw muttered her agreement through a mouthful of moss. Both cats padded away from the stream and back toward the DawnClan camp.

When they arrived, and passed through the bramble bushes at the entrance to the camp, they headed toward the elders' den, being

careful to avoid the large puddle still in the center of the camp.

"You get the prey, and I'll give them this moss. Let's hope that they don't complain about ticks," Whisperpaw shivered, "Mouse bile clings to fur for a whole moon!"

Echopaw laughed, then ran over to the fresh-kill pile. It was much larger now that the puddles had dried up and it had been sunny for the last few days since the storm. But, according to the patrols, which Echopaw hadn't been on, the river was still just as flooded. Eveningstar had ordered that no cat, unless they were a warrior, was allowed near the river, so Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt had decided to show Echopaw and Whisperpaw how to take care of the elders.

Echopaw grabbed two voles and a blackbird for the elders and padded back to the elders' den.

"Here's your moss, Spruceclaw," Echopaw heard Whisperpaw meow.

"Thanks, Whisperpaw," he replied.

Echopaw stepped into the elders' den and saw Whisperpaw giving Spruceclaw some moss. Fogtail and Ferrettail already had theirs and were piling it up in the corners.

When they saw Echopaw with their fresh-kill, Fogtail meowed, "Thank StarClan you're finally here. I'm so hungry I could eat a badger!"

"Well," snapped Echopaw, and suddenly all of her worries spilled over into anger. "If you are really that hungry, you can get up and walk over to the fresh-kill pile yourself. Just because you're an elder doesn't mean you can't take care of yourself!"

Fogtail looked taken aback at her sudden outburst, then she sneered, "You think that you're *so* important that you should be given a better job than taking care of the lazy bags of bones you call the elders, huh?" She snorted. "Well, here's some news for you! You are not *that* important! Doesn't anyone teach young cats respect anymore?"

What made Echopaw blurt out the next thing, she never knew. "You say I'm not important? I am *so* important that the Clans will be destroyed without me!" Fogtail narrowed her eyes in fury, but looked confused.

Whisperpaw had a look of horror and disbelief on her face. She stalked over to Echopaw and dragged her out of the elders' den.

"What in StarClan's name were you thinking?" hissed Whisperpaw, "Have you got bees in your brain?"

Echopaw didn't reply.

"Just do what you're told! Then *everyone's* life will be easier!" she growled, then turned and stalked back toward the elders' den. Echopaw sat there for a few more moments, then reluctantly followed her sister back into the den.

* * *

Later that evening, Whisperpaw still wasn't talking to her. Echopaw sat by the fresh-kill pile, eating a mouse, with her head hung low.

Why did I have to get so mad at Fogtail? Echopaw thought. After all, Fogtail had been expecting fresh-kill when Echopaw and Whisperpaw brought back the moss.

Echopaw looked up from her mouse and saw the evening patrol returning. Copperleaf was at the head, with Twilightfoot, Sunfur, and Prairiefoot behind him. They went to report to Eveningstar, then padded to the warriors' den. Echopaw turned back to her mouse and finished it up.

Then she heard a commotion coming from the medicine cats' den. Echopaw padded over to it to see what was going on. She saw Yellowpaw bouncing around the den and Goldheart purring with amusement. Aspenleaf wasn't there anymore, she had been told she could move back into the warriors' den, but that she couldn't do any warrior duties yet, earlier this evening. Creekfall had nearly knocked over Aspenleaf in his excitement.

Echopaw looked inside the den and heard Yellowpaw squealing

with excitement. "I get to go to the Moonfall tonight! I get to go to the Moonfall tonight!" Echopaw heard her chant.

Echopaw stepped into the medicine cats' den and, when Yellowpaw saw her, meowed, "Have fun, you lucky furball! You're going to meet cats from other Clans before *I* am."

Yellowpaw nodded excitedly, then looked at Goldheart, "What are the names of the other medicine cats?"

"Crystalheart is the medicine cat of DuskClan, and she doesn't have an apprentice. Then there's Bushtail; he's the medicine cat of NightClan, and he *does* have an apprentice: Icepaw. And the medicine cat of DayClan is Lilyfoot, and her apprentice's name is Fernpaw; he's the oldest medicine cat apprentice," Goldheart meowed.

Yellowpaw suddenly looked scared, "Lilyfoot and Fernpaw aren't going to attack us right? I mean, their leader *really* wants to take our territory."

"No, they won't," Goldheart insisted, "Remember what I told you: medicine cats stand apart from rival between Clan and Clan. They just want to help every cat equally, like you will." He bent down to lick Yellowpaw's head.

Echopaw doubted that. "What if they *do* attack you?"

Goldheart looked at her with confidence. "They will *not.* That will upset StarClan," he meowed, then he turned and looked at the sun, which was going to set soon. "We have to get going. There's a long journey ahead of us. Come on, Yellowpaw." They both padded out of the den, and Echopaw followed.

Goldheart went to tell Eveningstar, who meowed, "Just be careful; even if the medicine cats of DayClan don't attack you, you can't be so sure about the rest of the Clan. It's unfortunate that the Moonfall is behind DayClan's territory. Just stay close to the Thunderpath, and we all pray to StarClan that you make it there and back safely."

"Thank you, Eveningstar." Goldheart dipped his head. "And don't

worry, we'll most likely come across the other medicine cats, and we will all travel together, which will be safer."

Yellowpaw was saying goodbye to her brother, sister, mother, and father down in the clearing. Every cat knew that she wouldn't be able to tell them what would happen at the Moonfall, but that didn't stop them from wishing her luck.

Moonshine licked her daughter's head and Twigfoot meowed, "Good luck, and be safe."

"I will," Yellowpaw promised.

"Come on, Yellowpaw, let's get going," Goldheart called, and together, the two cats went through the bramble bushes and out into the darkness of the night.

Echopaw watched them go with a strange feeling in her stomach, though she couldn't identify what it was.

Echopaw turned and padded over to the apprentices' den once she was sure they were gone.

Echopaw sat there in her nest and wondered what would happen when Yellowpaw arrived at the Moonfall. What dreams would StarClan send her and Goldheart? What if they had the same vision as she did? But why wait? Wouldn't StarClan send it to Goldheart sooner so they could warn the Clan?

Then Echopaw thought, *Why didn't Whisperpaw and I tell the Clan? They would've been warned then.* But Echopaw realized they probably wouldn't believe her, and they would more likely believe a medicine cat than two young apprentices.

Echopaw heard pawsteps outside the den and turned to see Whisperpaw carrying two mice. She dropped one at Echopaw's feet, then meowed, "Sorry I snapped at you earlier. I don't think you should have been rude to Fogtail; you almost blurted out the prophecy. I went to see her after I sent you away and she asked what you meant when you said that the Clans would be destroyed without you, and I had to cover up for you! Now Fogtail is going to

suspect something suspicious about you, then she'll tell the other elders, and soon enough, it'll spread through the *whole* camp!" It looked as if Whisperpaw's attempts to apologize had turned into rage, and she was yelling again.

Echopaw thought about what Whisperpaw had said and realized she was right. "Yeah, I shouldn't have snapped at her like that, you're right. I just don't like not being able to tell anyone. It's so hard to keep a secret like this one!" Now her own apology ended in yelling.

"Shh! You'll wake up all of DawnClan!" Whisperpaw hissed, "And it *is* hard, I know—"

"No you don't!" Echopaw spat, "You have a *much* easier time than me!"

"That's because I don't think about it every waking moment of my life!" Whisperpaw retorted. Then her face softened and she meowed, "Just *try* not to think about it. We *will* tell them, but only when they'll believe us."

Echopaw looked at her sister, and saw sympathy in her eyes. Echopaw realized that Whisperpaw *did* know how she felt; she knew how hard it was to keep a secret like the one they had to. Echopaw tried to calm herself down by changing the subject. "Do we have training tomorrow?" She asked.

"Well, I asked Gravelpelt and he said that we were going to hunt, and—"

"Good," Echopaw meowed, looking down at the mouse Whisperpaw had brought her and took a bite of it.

Whisperpaw shuffled her paws nervously, "I... I meant Gravelpelt and I were going hunting. He said you and Bronzepelt are staying at camp to help get fresh moss for the warriors' den and nursery, and helping Goldheart and Yellowpaw with the elder's ticks when they get back."

Echopaw was so outraged she spit out the mouse. "WHAT?" she

snarled. "I have to *stay at camp*?"

"That's what Gravelpelt said," Whisperpaw muttered, looking down at her paws.

Echopaw turned away from her sister, all attempts of calming down gone. She felt angry with Whisperpaw for some reason, and meowed curtly, "Good night."

"G-Good night, Echopaw," Whisperpaw replied hesitantly. Echopaw thought she heard sadness in her sister's voice, but she ignored it.

Echopaw laid down in her nest with her back to Whisperpaw, growling as she did, and thought about how unfair every cat was being.

Whisperpaw gets to learn to hunt tomorrow, while I have to stay at camp!

Whisperpaw was right; the news of her rudeness to Fogtail had spread around the Clan and now she was confined to camp tomorrow. If they even *knew* what she was going through, how *she* and Whisperpaw were the *only* cats able to save the Clans, they wouldn't have punished her for being rude. They would understand how stressful knowing about the prophecy was. Echopaw wondered if Yellowpaw was going to have the same problem if she had the dream at the Moonfall. Would she?

I'll ask her when she and Goldheart get back.

Echopaw closed her eyes, and tried to fall asleep, but couldn't. She didn't want the sun to rise; she didn't *want* to clean out the dens; she wanted to learn to hunt, like Whisperpaw. She turned around and saw Whisperpaw sleeping, her chest rising and falling peacefully. Why did Whisperpaw have an easier time coping with the prophecy than Echopaw? It wasn't fair.

Echopaw got to her paws and quietly padded to the den's entrance. She looked up and saw the half-moon, straight up in the sky. Yellowpaw and Goldheart were probably at the Moonfall now, announcing Yellowpaw as an apprentice. Then, they would lay

down, or do whatever they do to have dreams with StarClan, and spend the night there.

Echopaw looked at the bramble entrance and longed to leave, to explore the forest, like every other lucky furball in the Clan got to. She glanced around the camp, looking for any sign of a cat awake. She found none and slowly padded toward the bramble bushes marking the entrance to the camp. She knew she would be in trouble if she was caught, but she needed to feel the wind in her fur, see the night sky spread out above her. In camp, she just felt trapped.

She checked behind her once more, and, when she saw no signs of any cats, she raced out into the forest, running away from secrecy, running away from the responsibility of knowing the prophecy. Echopaw passed the Great Pine, then reached the stream and jumped. She cleared it in one leap, then continued to run through the forest. She felt free, the wind blowing through her fur as she raced through the night. She looked up and saw the stars through the gaps between the trees. She ran up and down the hills, deeper into DawnClan territory. She jumped over the rocks, ducked under the fallen, mossy logs, and dodged the trees, weaving in and out of the forest. Echopaw looked around and saw the trees thinning out and realized she was near the meadow. She sprinted out of the forest and leapt up, preparing to feel the soft grass beneath her paws, the wildflowers around her as she landed. She prepared for this, but landed in something else entirely.

Echopaw plunged into ice-cold water, and she realized she had forgotten that the river was flooded and that it covered up the meadow. She lashed out, trying to find the banks, but currents dragged her further and further under. She kicked toward where she thought was up, but was dragged under again. She felt like those twigs and leaves being dragged under helplessly, rushing in and out of the currents. Her lungs screamed for air, but she didn't know where the surface was. She kicked and fought against the rushing water, but the currents were ten times stronger than her small legs.

Finally her head surfaced and she sucked in every last bit of air she could, before she was dragged back under the water again.

Echopaw opened her eyes and saw the currents pulling her forward, faster and faster. Everything went dark and for a moment, and the current sped up. Something roared overhead and she realized that she was under the Thunderpath.

Once everything lit up again as she left the tunnel under the Thunderpath, she saw large rocks in the middle of the river. She squirmed, and the current pulled her around them, narrowly missing the first few. But the next time, she wasn't so lucky. The largest rock of them all loomed straight ahead, but no matter how hard she fought against the rushing water, she knew she was going to hit it. She closed her eyes and braced herself. Her tired legs curled up against her body, and, a second later, immense pain exploded all over as everything went pitch black.

* * *

"Do you think she's alright?"

"I don't know, Larksong."

"Do you think she is from one of the other Clans?"

"I don't know that either, the river washed away any scent she had on her."

"I certainly haven't ever seen her before; she looks pretty young."

Echopaw opened her eyes, blinking away water. She turned and saw many cats standing near her: a dark brown tabby she-cat, a young pale ginger she-cat, a fluffy pure-white she-cat, an older long-haired pale ginger tom, and a young silver and white tabby she-cat.

Echopaw blinked again, trying to clear away the cats from her mind. But, when she opened them again, they were still there. She became confused. She didn't recognize any of them. Was she in StarClan?

"Oh, Bushtail!" the young silver and white she-cat squealed. "She's awake!"

The long-haired pale ginger tom turned at her call. Echopaw guessed he was the cat called Bushtail.

Bushtail. Echopaw had heard that name before, but where?

Bushtail stood over Echopaw and meowed gently, "Are you alright?"

"No! Who are you? Where's camp? Where am I? Why am I here?" she blurted out.

"Shh, calm down, I'm Bushtail an—"

But the rest of his sentence was drowned out as Echopaw's thoughts overpowered her. Goldheart had mentioned Bushtail when talking to Yellowpaw about medicine cats' names. Bushtail was the NightClan medicine cat, which meant that the silver and white tabby she-cat beside him was his apprentice, Icepaw. It also meant she was in *NightClan* territory; she was *far* away from home...

Echopaw looked at Bushtail and the other cats in fear. Her mind flashed to her Clanmates, who must be worried sick, if not furious. "How long have I been out?" she demanded.

"Not that long," meowed the brown tabby she-cat, and Echopaw had forgotten she was there. "We found you on our territory by the river while out on the dawn patrol. Cliffpaw, over here," she motioned to the young pale ginger she-cat, "persuaded the patrol to take you back to camp."

The older, pure-white she-cat, who hadn't spoken yet, narrowed her eyes; Echopaw could tell that she didn't like a DawnClan cat being here.

Cliffpaw nodded at the brown warrior's words and asked, "Are you *sure* you're alright? You looked awful when we found you."

Echopaw realized that she did feel quite sore. Her left shoulder throbbed and she started to lick it, trying to soothe the pain.

"That's where you hit something in the water," meowed Bushtail.

"It was a boulder," replied Echopaw curtly, continuing to lick her

shoulder and trying to think about how she was going to get home when she was being held captive in an enemy Clan's camp.

How will my Clanmates find me? Will NightClan hold me hostage? How can I escape with all these cats watching me?

Her thoughts were cut off as the pale ginger apprentice, Cliffpaw, spoke.

"Wow, that must have hurt, and your Clan must be worried sick."

Bushtail sat up at this. "Yes. What Clan do you belong to?" Bushtail asked Echopaw.

Echopaw blinked uncertainly, glancing at every cat in the den suspiciously.

"Hello? What Clan do you belong to?" repeated the white she-cat in annoyance.

Bushtail nodded in encouragement.

Echopaw sighed and meowed reluctantly, "DawnClan."

"Larksong," Bushtail nodded to the dark brown tabby she-cat. "Take a patrol over to the DawnClan camp and tell them we have one of their cats." Then he turned to Echopaw, "What's your name?"

"E-Echopaw," she replied hesitantly, sitting up in worry at the mention of her camp.

"Okay, tell them we have Echopaw. Do you know where the DawnClan camp is? I've never been there."

"No. But I'm sure Beechstar or one of the senior warriors knows," Larksong replied.

Echopaw felt uncertain about NightClan cats going to her camp, and she got to her paws, tail flashing irritably.

"Don't worry," meowed Cliffpaw brightly, seeing Echopaw's expression. Echopaw wondered how she could be so cheerful; if an

enemy apprentice had been rescued and taken into the DawnClan camp, Echopaw would be angry and worried that the apprentice might use something against her Clan.

Larksong started to leave the den. "I'll take two others with—"

"Why can't I just go back to my own camp by myself?" Echopaw argued.

"Because it isn't safe for you to travel by yourself," Bushtail meowed.

"You're in *our* territory," meowed Larksong. "We can't have an enemy cat wandering around our territory now, can we?"

Echopaw scowled. "You could take me," she added stubbornly to Bushtail.

"It's *your* fault you fell into the river, so it's *your Clan's* responsibility to get you," the fluffy white she-cat growled. Echopaw flattened her ears and glared at the NightClan warrior.

"Easy, Swantail," Bushtail murmured.

The white she-cat gave a disdainful sniff and left the den. Larksong glanced at Bushtail for a heartbeat, then followed Swantail from the medicine cats' den.

Echopaw blinked in worry, praying to StarClan that these cats wouldn't harm her Clanmates in any way.

"Are you the only apprentice in your Clan?" Cliffpaw asked eagerly, her blue eyes wide.

Echopaw turned hesitantly to Icepaw and Cliffpaw, who were both looking at her curiously. "No," she replied curtly.

"Oh, well we're not the only apprentices in NightClan. Pebblepaw is another apprentice; she's a bit older than me and Icepaw. And then there's Goosepaw and Duckpaw, brothers. Oh, and one of our queens, Brownear, had three kits a few days ago, two tom-kits and a she-kit. They are so cute! She named the two tom-kits Ripplekit and

Tumblekit, and the she-kit is named Flowerkit!" Cliffpaw babbled on.

Echopaw stared ahead, trying to block out Cliffpaw's rambling.

"Cliffpaw, she needs to rest," meowed Icepaw with a glance at her mentor, Bushtail.

Echopaw glanced at Icepaw, and she was suddenly reminded of Yellowpaw.

Bushtail turned and nodded at Icepaw, then dropped something at Echopaw's feet. "Poppy seeds. They'll help."

Echopaw stared the seeds warily. Then she remembered that medicine cats were less bound by Clan rivalries and more by service to StarClan; Bushtail wouldn't hurt her. Echopaw bent down and gratefully lapped up the seeds, then she got to her paws and stretched.

"I have to clean up in here with Icepaw," Bushtail meowed, then turned to Cliffpaw. "Cliffpaw, take Echopaw outside and sit beside the apprentices' den until her Clanmates get here; don't wander. Tell Beechstar I said it was alright that the DawnClan apprentice can leave my den," he ordered.

Cliffpaw got up and meowed, "Come on then!"

Echopaw turned to Bushtail before she left and dipped her head. "Thanks, Bushtail," she meowed, then turned around toward the pale ginger NightClan apprentice.

She padded out of Bushtail's den and looked around. The NightClan camp was in a thick grove of pine trees. It reminded Echopaw of the DawnClan camp, but with more pine trees and less aspen, oak, or ash trees. Echopaw followed Cliffpaw toward a thick briar clump, and moments later, a black and white she-cat about the same size as Cliffpaw came out of it. Echopaw guessed that the clump of briar was the apprentices' den.

"Oh, this is Pebblepaw. Pebblepaw, this is Echopaw, the cat who we found washed up on the riverbank," Cliffpaw meowed.

Pebblepaw narrowed her eyes, looking Echopaw up and down, then nodded curtly.

Echopaw flattened her ears against the apprentice's hostility; but Echopaw couldn't blame her. After all, she was in *their* camp.

"We'll sit here, Echopaw," Cliffpaw meowed. "But first, we have to tell Beechstar. Coming, Pebblepaw?" Pebblepaw blinked disapprovingly at her denmate, but followed her anyways, scowling at Echopaw as she did.

Echopaw hesitantly followed the two NightClan apprentices across the camp to a large rock, where the scent of fresh-kill filled Echopaw's nose.

This must be where their fresh-kill pile is, Echopaw thought.

A black tom with orange patches sat by it, and Echopaw blinked. Was this Beechstar?

"Robintail!" Cliffpaw called.

Echopaw blinked. Not Beechstar.

Robintail looked up and meowed, "Do you need something?"

"Yes, have you seen Beechstar?" Cliffpaw asked politely.

Robintail looked hesitant, staring at Echopaw with narrowed orange eyes. Then something flickered in his eyes, as if he was remembering something someone had told him, though Echopaw couldn't see what; Cliffpaw had only asked where the leader was.

"Yes; I'll get him," the black and orange warrior meowed, not taking his narrowed eyes off Echopaw.

Echopaw looked away uncomfortably, wishing she was home, where no warrior stared at her like she was a piece of prey.

"I'll be back," meowed Robintail, padding toward a cream-furred tom, who was talking to a ginger tom.

"The cream-colored tom is Beechstar," Cliffpaw whispered in Echopaw's ear. "And the ginger tom is Mapleleaf; he's the deputy."

Echopaw blinked worriedly as Beechstar turned at Robintail's words and started walking toward her; she felt her stomach tighten in fear as the leader of NightClan approached, homesickness creeping through her.

"Beechstar," Cliffpaw meowed politely as the leader reached them. "Bushtail needed his den to himself and wanted to let you know that Pebblepaw and I are going to sit with Echopaw by the apprentices' den."

Pebblepaw flashed an angry glance at Cliffpaw. Echopaw knew she didn't like the way Cliffpaw had included her; she didn't want to be associated with Echopaw, not one bit.

Beechstar nodded, keeping his gaze locked on Echopaw the whole time Cliffpaw spoke, which made Echopaw's fur crawl with apprehension. "Alright, just don't wander the camp; I don't want you in the warriors' way. And I expect her Clan will come and pick her up soon. So," Beechstar added to Echopaw in a stern tone, "don't become too familiar with our camp. Luckily you washed up on our territory and not any other Clans, because my warriors have softer hearts."

Echopaw couldn't tell if the NightClan leader was being truthful or sarcastic; but either way, his words sounded laced with foreshadowing; of what, Echopaw didn't know.

Cliffpaw dipped her head, and Echopaw nodded mutely, and they turned toward the apprentices' den. Cliffpaw sat down in relaxation, tail swishing. Echopaw sat too, more stiffly, but Pebblepaw by far was the stiffest of the three; she looked like she was preparing for a battle by the way she was acting.

There was a silence. Echopaw glanced at Cliffpaw. She had thought other Clan cats would be *so* different; she thought they would be rude and over-protective of their territory; she thought they would drive her out with teeth and claws m. And, as she found out, some of the cats were like that, like Pebblepaw and that warrior,

Swantail. Echopaw was surprised to hear they had even *wanted* to rescue her.

"So, how did you get into the river? Isn't your camp far away from it?" asked Pebblepaw sarcastically, breaking the silence.

"Nevermind that," meowed Echopaw hastily, and she changed the subject by asking, "What are the other apprentices' names again?"

"Duckpaw and Goosepaw; they're the oldest apprentices. They've been training for nearly six moons now," replied Cliffpaw, sighing. "Bossy furballs, if you ask me," she added, smirking.

"So where are they now?" asked Echopaw. "Are they training?"

Pebblepaw ignored her, focusing on swaying pines, and acting as if Echopaw wasn't there.

But Cliffpaw turned to her and sighed, "No, the lucky furballs get to go to the Moonfall. They left this morning with their mentors, when Bushtail and Icepaw got back. As you know, we're the furthest away from the Moonfall, so they had to leave a *lot* earlier than a cat in say, DayClan, would."

"I know." Echopaw nodded. "How long have *you* been training?" she asked.

"Five moons," replied Cliffpaw, chest swelling.

"What about you?" Echopaw asked Pebblepaw hesitantly, but the NightClan apprentice just stared ahead, her nose in the air. Echopaw shrugged and meowed, "My sister and I have been training for over two moons now."

"Oh, so you're quite new," meowed Cliffpaw.

Echopaw nodded.

Suddenly Cliffpaw's eyes narrowed and her neck fur bristled. She seemed to have spotted someone entering the camp.

When Echopaw turned around to see what Cliffpaw had been

staring at, she saw a bunch of NightClan cats in the center of the camp, all surrounding four cats that Echopaw did recognize, expressions full of hostility.

Her mother and father stood facing her, looking irritated and dismayed. Their eyes were narrowed, and their fur was bushed up. Bronzepelt sat next to them and had a look of complete disappointment and agitation on his face, and, with the look he was giving her, she guessed she would be confined to camp for the next four seasons. But nothing prepared Echopaw for the look of utter betrayal and fury on Whisperpaw's face. Echopaw stepped back in surprise as her sister's glare burned holes in her pelt. Cliffpaw and Pebblepaw took one look at Whisperpaw and backed away into the apprentices' den. She heard Pebblepaw snicker at Echopaw as she turned and stalked away.

So now Echopaw was standing there, facing her Clanmates all alone. She didn't think she could handle their anger. She hesitantly stepped toward them and muttered her thanks to Larksong for bringing them here to pick her up.

"Come on, let's go," meowed Bronzepelt, in a tight and stern voice. His eyes narrowed and he twitched his tail in agitation.

Echopaw padded slowly after them as they left the NightClan camp. Rustypelt nodded curtly to Beechstar, who did the same, both of the toms' eyes narrowed. Echopaw shivered. The heart-pounding feeling they gave her when she'd been near them told her she couldn't trust them. She *shouldn't* trust them; nor any cats outside of her own Clan for that matter.

If she had to face them in battle one day, she didn't want to hesitate and be disloyal to her Clan. Echopaw knew that she and Cliffpaw could never be friends, like she and Hailkit were; they would always be enemies. Echopaw glanced back at their camp once more and saw hostility on the NightClan warriors' faces, instead of the hospitality they had shown earlier.

The rescue patrol passed under the pine branches and out of the camp, Echopaw's head and tail hanging as she followed her Clanmates back to DawnClan territory.

None of them talked while they were on NightClan territory. Echopaw looked at her paws, watching them drag across the forest floor. Why had the NightClan cats been so nice to her? Maybe Beechstar was right, the cats in NightClan had soft hearts for cats in danger; they couldn't let any cat die. Echopaw wondered whether any of her Clanmates would do the same for a cat of another Clan. They probably would, but no matter how helpful they would have been, cats from other Clans could never *ever* be friends like cats from the same Clan would be. Loyalty to the Clan made them stronger; divided loyalties weakened them. The Clans would always be rivals.

Echopaw thought about those stories that her parents, the elders, and other warriors had told her, the stories about how some cats had fallen in love with cats from other Clans, and how badly it had turned out; she'd heard them since she was a kit.

Echopaw sighed and thought how hard it would be to have the Clans be allies. Then Echopaw remembered. They *would* have to, and Echopaw and Whisperpaw would have to persuade them to, according to the prophecy. Echopaw thought, *That'll be impossible,* and hung her head lower. Her life just seemed to be full of hardship and terrible prophecies and omens.

Echopaw looked up and saw the Thunderpath ahead; they would have to cross it to get back to DawnClan territory. She had never crossed a Thunderpath before. Echopaw swallowed nervously and padded onward shakily. Once they were at the Thunderpath, Rustypelt broke the long silence and ordered, "We'll travel in pairs. I will go by myself first, since there are five of us. Then, Whisperpaw and Sparktail will be next, followed by Echopaw and Bronzepelt."

Echopaw looked at Bronzepelt and realized that, no matter how irritated or displeased her mentor was at her, he would protect her.

Rustypelt stepped through the grass and looked at the Thunderpath. Echopaw didn't hear any monsters coming, and her father raced across it. Heartbeats seemed to drag on into days. Then Rustypelt yowled, "Okay! Whisperpaw and Sparktail, come on!"

Echopaw watched Whisperpaw and Sparktail padding through the

grass. A monster roared in the distance, but they raced onto the Thunderpath. Echopaw closed her eyes, the monster was coming closer, and closer, then it sped past and off into the distance again. She strained her ears to hear that they were okay, and was very pleased to hear Sparktail yowl, "We're safe! You're turn!"

Echopaw followed Bronzepelt through the grass and waited for his signal to go. He looked down at Echopaw, all his anger gone for a moment, and meowed, "When I say 'run', you follow me across the Thunderpath. Sprint like you've never sprinted before, and don't look back. Act as if all the other Clans are chasing us."

Echopaw nodded, her head spinning. She looked ahead. There were no monsters in sight.

"Run!" yowled Bronzepelt, and he dashed onto the Thunderpath. Echopaw raced after him. The Thunderpath felt cold and hard on her paws, and her legs were sore from lashing out against the river's currents last night. But she ignored the pain and stiffness in her legs as she sprinted faster.

They were halfway there now. Echopaw heard roaring and was tempted to see where it was coming from, but kept her eyes focused on the other side of the Thunderpath, not looking back, as Bronzepelt had ordered. The roaring became louder and louder; Echopaw sprinted toward the grass on the other side, her sore legs screaming in protest. She prayed to StarClan that the monster wouldn't see her. Echopaw leapt into the grass and heard the monster speeding past, making a gust of wind as it did. Echopaw's chest heaved and she plopped over on her side, gasping for air. All the other cats had laid down too, catching their breath as well. Echopaw sighed in relief; every cat had made it across the Thunderpath, and now they were safe on DawnClan territory again.

Echopaw stood up and stared at NightClan territory, glad to be out of it. She sighed; she knew she would be in big trouble when they got back to camp. She didn't make eye contact with her Clanmates as Bronzepelt told the patrol they should get going; the sun was slowly on its way down toward the horizon once more.

After they had all caught their breath, the five cats headed deeper

into the forest and headed toward the DawnClan camp, Echopaw's head bowed the whole time.

Chapter 10

Echopaw had been in big trouble when they got back to camp, just as she had expected. But she didn't think it would've been as bad as it was. Every cat had stared at her as she passed, looking disappointed. Echopaw felt horrible.

Eveningstar was outraged, and Echopaw had hung her head so low during his scolding that it touched the ground. He growled about how she had disobeyed his order that no cat, unless they were a warrior, was to leave camp. Echopaw had become confused that Whisperpaw had been able to leave camp to help pick her up from NightClan, but didn't dare argue with her leader. Eveningstar had confined her to camp until Bronzepelt felt she was ready to train again. And she was solely responsible for taking care of the elders until the next Gathering; Whisperpaw didn't have to help. By saying this, Eveningstar had meant bringing them fresh-kill at dawn and at dusk, switching out their moss, and searching their coats for ticks.

After Eveningstar had declared her punishment, Echopaw had started to walk back toward the apprentices' den, where she felt she should go to be alone in her guilt, but was stopped by Rustypelt. He had told her to follow him, and they sat by the bramble bushes. He had saved his scolding until they reached camp. He growled about how DawnClan was now in debt to NightClan because they saved her life. Rustypelt hissed that because she had been so selfish and irresponsible to run away, now NightClan would expect something back from them.

"Good thing you didn't wash up on DayClan territory!" he had snarled, "They would have healed you up all nice and then asked for some of our territory! If we objected, then they would say that we owe them something, and that they wanted the payment in territory!"

Echopaw had realized he was right, muttered her apology, and started padding slower to the apprentices' den, feeling even more

guilty. She now realized why the NightClan cats had been so nice to her. Echopaw sighed and had continued to walk to the apprentices' den, but was stopped yet again by her mentor. He explained how she had disobeyed Eveningstar, the leader, and that she ran away for no reason.

"You can't be upset that you were told you to take care of the elders today. It was your own fault you snapped at Fogtail. Now, because of your foolishness, you've got yourself confined to camp until the next full moon." Bronzepelt muttered, and Echopaw bowed her head, murmuring her apologies over and over again.

Her mother was angry, but mostly relieved. "You worried every cat to death! Imagine how I felt to hear that you had disappeared and that your scent trail had ended by the river. I thought you'd died!" Echopaw had felt even more guilty and horrible after hearing Sparktail saying this.

Echopaw had thought she would never feel happy again. She wondered how the Clans would ever listen to her when she told them the prophecy. Echopaw had felt useless. And now they would never listen to her.

Echopaw had sighed and dragged herself to the apprentices' den, expecting to be stopped and scolded again on her way there, but wasn't. As she stepped in, she saw Whisperpaw lying in her nest. Echopaw braced herself for the storm of anger that would come out of her sister's mouth, but it never came. Instead, her sister was ignoring her, giving no signs that she had even seen Echopaw. Echopaw hung her head low and muttered, "I'm sorry," and curled up into her nest. She had laid there, feeling tired, even though it was only just past sunhigh. She had closed her eyes and fallen asleep, still feeling guilty.

It was now the day after she had received her punishment. She had been woken up at sunrise by Bronzepelt to get started on the elders care. He hadn't sounded angry with her anymore, and Echopaw had realized he thought she got the punishment she deserved. Echopaw had seen no sign of Whisperpaw, and realized she had gone out training again. Eveningstar had announced, because of what the dawn patrol had reported, that apprentices and older kits may leave

the camp now only if they were accompanied by a warrior or queen.

Echopaw now sat by the fresh-kill pile, eating a vole. Hailkit came padding up to her, and asked, "Can I join you?"

Echopaw nodded and continued to eat her vole. Hailkit had forgiven Echopaw easily, but her own sister still wasn't talking to her.

"So why did you run away? Don't you like it here?" he asked, looking hurt, but sympathetic.

"I didn't run away; I fell into the river. But nevermind that. What happened when the Clan noticed that I was gone?" she asked, feeling waves of guilt washing over her once more.

"Well, your parents got really worried and Bronzepelt volunteered to lead a patrol to follow your scent. Every cat was really worried. When they found your scent and explained how it had ended at the river, every cat thought you were dead. I was really terrified, like most of the Clan was. Then a NightClan patrol came across one of our patrols and told us that they had found you on their territory by the river, and that you were alive. Every cat was relieved, but then became really angry. The look on Whisperpaw's face made me nearly jump out of my fur. I looked as if she—" he stopped, looking at Echopaw with sadness and apology in his eyes. "Well you're alive and back home, and that's what matters." He flicked Echopaw's ear with his tail and let her finish her vole in peace.

Echopaw felt horrible again. She could imagine how Whisperpaw had felt when she had heard she was missing. She must have been scared to death. Echopaw guessed that after her worry, her first thought was of the prophecy. Whisperpaw must have been completely terrified, because without Echopaw, there weren't Two, and the Clans could be doomed. Echopaw now understood her sister's anger, and she reminded herself to apologize to her sister later, and try to gain Whisperpaw's trust and confidence again.

Echopaw finished her vole, then grabbed a sparrow, a mouse, and a blackbird for the elders. She got up and padded toward the elders'

den.

"Echopaw has been acting strange lately, always jumpy," Echopaw heard Fogtail meow, and Echopaw paused at the den entrance.

"Yeah, I wonder what is bothering her?" replied Spruceclaw. "First, she snaps at you like that, and I know Echopaw, that wasn't like her. Then, she runs away and almost gets herself killed."

"Yes, but what I don't understand is why she said that she's so important that the Clans will be destroyed without her," meowed Ferrettail. "Something is really upsetting her, I know it."

"Poor thing," she heard Spruceclaw reply. "I think I'll ask her about it."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. The way she's been acting, it's like she's keeping some sort of secret," warned Fogtail.

There was a pause and then Ferrettail meowed, "Yeah, I think you're right. It'll just upset her more. She'll just get into more trouble, and she doesn't need that."

"Yeah, but she deserves it, running away like that," Echopaw heard Fogtail reply, "Speaking of her punishment, isn't she supposed to be bringing us some fresh-kill soon? I wonder what's keeping her?"

Echopaw knew she couldn't stand there any longer. After a few moments, she swallowed nervously and stepped into the elders' den. As she walked in, she saw Ferrettail and Fogtail sitting up, pretending they had just woken up. Spruceclaw turned around and meowed, "Hello, Echopaw, thanks for the prey."

Echopaw dropped the mouse, blackbird, and sparrow at the elder's paws and replied, "You're welcome. Need anything else?" She tried to sound as polite as she could, so that the elders wouldn't suspect she had been eavesdropping on their conversation.

"Oh, no, we're all good. Thanks," meowed Ferrettail in the same polite voice.

Echopaw dipped her head and padded out of the den. She saw

Whisperpaw returning from training with Gravelpelt, carrying a rabbit in her jaws. Echopaw felt jealousy tingling in her paws. Whisperpaw had already learned how to hunt, and it looked like she was really good if she could manage to catch a rabbit. Whisperpaw was out of camp training, while Echopaw was stuck in camp looking after the elders.

She watched as Whisperpaw padded over to the fresh-kill log and added her catch to the pile. Echopaw was about to go over and congratulate her, when she realized that her sister still wasn't talking to her and would just ignore her again. Echopaw sighed and found herself wandering towards the medicine cats' den.

As Echopaw looked inside the den, she realized that in all the commotion of her punishment, she still hadn't asked the medicine cats about her dream, to see if they had had it too. She peeked inside the den and called, "Yellowpaw? Goldheart?"

Yellowpaw immediately poked her head outside the den and meowed, "Hey Echopaw! Need something?" At least Yellowpaw was happy and talking to her, unlike Whisperpaw.

"Hello, I was wondering if I can come in. I need to ask you something," she replied.

"Sure, we were just organizing the herbs, so try not to step on them," Yellowpaw meowed, then lead the way into the den. She showed Echopaw a spot where she could sit that wasn't near any of the herbs on the floor.

Goldheart looked up as Echopaw was brought into the den. He looked confused. "Hi, Echopaw. Is there something wrong?"

"Uh," Echopaw shuffled her paws on the ground. "Well, I was wondering i-if you had a strange dream a-at the Moonfall the other night," she finished and looked away.

"You know we're not supposed to tell you about anything at the Moonfall," meowed Goldheart sternly but gently, his gaze searching hers.

Echopaw swallowed nervously, "I... I know... but..." she trailed off. Then she thought of something. "I'll be right back." Echopaw got up, and Goldheart watched her, confusion clouding his face.

Echopaw carefully made her way out of the den, not stepping on any herbs. She padded out into the clearing and looked around, but found no sign of who she was looking for.

Finally she found her. Whisperpaw was sitting by the nursery, talking to Cloverkit and Hailkit. Echopaw ran over to her sister.

"Whisperpaw!" she called. Cloverkit and Hailkit looked up, but Whisperpaw showed no signs that any cat had said anything.

This is hopeless, she thought. "Whisperpaw! Please! This is really important!" But her sister still didn't budge. Echopaw sighed and looked up in frustration. She saw a pale gray bird circling across the evening sky. She blinked. It was silver, and was swirling through the sky... whirling through the sky. Whirlheart! "That bird was sure *whirl*-ing through the sky, right from the *heart* of StarClan, like a *StarClan* warrior," she commented meaningfully, directing her words at Whisperpaw. Hailkit and Cloverkit looked at Echopaw in complete confusion.

"What?" asked Hailkit, bewildered.

"But birds don't come from StarClan," meowed Cloverkit slowly.

Echopaw ignored them. She was looking at Whisperpaw, who suddenly looked up at Echopaw, questions in her eyes. Echopaw silently thanked StarClan for the silver bird. Whisperpaw nodded at Echopaw, and Echopaw lead her to the medicine cats' den, leaving Cloverkit and Hailkit looking bewildered.

When they reached the den, Whisperpaw blurted out, "I'm sorry I wasn't talking to you. I just, oh, I don't know! But never mind about that, I'll apologize later. What about Whirlheart and StarClan? What do you know? What—"

"Shh! It's just, I started asking Yellowpaw and Goldheart if they had a strange dream at the Moonfall. He seemed to see that I wasn't just

curious; he knew I was hiding something," Echopaw meowed. She took a deep breath and continued, "I think we should tell them, the vision and the prophecy, but not that we're the cats meant to save the Clans."

Whisperpaw nodded. Then she sighed and replied, "Well, okay."

Echopaw lead Whisperpaw into the medicine cats' den, warning her not to step on the herbs. When she saw Yellowpaw and Goldheart, they looked really confused. "What's your sister here for? I thought you were asking me about the Moonfall?"

Echopaw sighed and looked at Whisperpaw. Whisperpaw nodded at her, and Echopaw started, "When Whisperpaw and I were kits, six moons old, we each had a dream, the same one, but separately." She paused. "Well, I was in a forest, and a StarClan warrior came to visit me; her name was Whirlheart."

Goldheart looked bewildered. "Whirlheart?" he asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why?" Echopaw asked curiously.

"It's just, oh, nevermind," Goldheart meowed. "I'll tell you if it has to do with what you're about to tell me, since we can't say what happened at the Moonfall unless it directly affects our Clan."

Echopaw shared a glance with Whisperpaw, then continued. "Whirlheart told me she had come to show me a vision. I was suddenly transported back to camp, but I was all alone. Then something huge started stomping through the forest toward camp. When it came into view, shadows covered up its body, so I couldn't see it very well. But it had paws bigger than me, claws longer than my tail, and jaws stronger than, like, anything you can imagine. Then.. the Whirlheart said, *'Darkness will veil the sky, but with the whispering voice of two, the forest as one will echo with light'.* " Echopaw finished hesitantly and glanced at Whisperpaw.

Goldheart sat in silence, thinking, and Yellowpaw looked scared, her green eyes widened.

Then Goldheart finally spoke, "Well, it means danger is coming, that's for sure. There must have been shadows because when that dark creature that comes, it will cast dark shadows on the forest, just like it said in the beginning of that prophecy. Now," he paused, "the rest of the prophecy, it's a bit confusing. But it had the word 'two' in it, and Whirlheart told me at the Moonfall, 'As snow melts and the forest recovers after long hardship, the Two in your Clan will leave; the mountains will soon be calling them'. Then she left. At first I wondered what she meant by 'the Two', but now I know it must connect with the prophecy you just told me. So, whoever the 'Two' is, they are in this Clan, and they will be leaving next new-leaf."

Echopaw looked at Whisperpaw in amazement. How had Goldheart riddled out the vision so quickly? It had taken Echopaw and Whisperpaw over two moons to figure it out.

Well, Echopaw thought, *he is a medicine cat.*

Yellowpaw nodded, looking scared. "So, w-what could the d-danger be? And why would the cats who have to save us from the danger leave us?"

"I don't know. StarClan has its reasons," sighed Goldheart. Then he looked up suddenly, realization in his eyes. He stared at Whisperpaw and Echopaw quickly, then looked back at the herbs, and Echopaw could sense his mind was reeling.

"Well, thanks, Goldheart," meowed Echopaw, hoping he hadn't figured out that she and her sister were the cats in the prophecy. Echoose glanced outside and saw the stars glittering in the sky; the sun had already set. "We'd better get to bed."

Goldheart and Yellowpaw nodded and turned back to their herbs as the two apprentices left their den. Echopaw and Whisperpaw padded to the apprentices' den and sat down on their nests.

"Well, based on what Goldheart said, we'll be going to the mountains," muttered Whisperpaw.

"In new-leaf?" Echopaw meowed, "Every cat knows that the weather

is still cold in the beginning of new-leaf, and it'll be worse in the mountains! If we do go, we'll probably get trapped in a blizzard! We can't go to the mountains and leave our Clan! Maybe we aren't the cats in the prophecy..."

"We have to be," sighed Whisperpaw, "It fits. No other cat was given the dream, not even the medicine cats."

Echopaw nodded, agreeing. "I guess," she yawned, then laid down in her mossy nest.

Whisperpaw murmured goodnight and laid down in her nest too.

Echopaw lay awake in thought for a while, wondering why she and Whisperpaw should go to the mountains. Would they go by themselves? Echopaw shuddered. Out in the cold snow on the top of the mountains all by themselves? How would they know which way to go? Why would they be going? What was the point?

Echopaw gave up and turned over, deciding to let the events unfold. One day, everything would become clear, and StarClan would help her along the way. She'd let them guide her paw- steps, and then she and Whisperpaw would be able to shape the Clans' destinies one day, as the prophecy had predicted.

Chapter 11

The next days were boring; Echopaw was still confined to camp, except for fetching fresh moss for the elders, whom she took care of all day, every day. Echopaw couldn't wait any longer until the full-moon; she was counting down until the next Gathering, then she'd be able to start her training again.

Whisperpaw had already started battle training and was on most of the dawn or evening patrols. Even though she had lots to do as an apprentice, Whisperpaw had shown Echopaw the hunting crouch every night before they went to sleep, so that Echopaw wouldn't be so far behind when she started training again. Being confined to camp wasn't so bad when Whisperpaw gave her some lessons.

Yellowpaw looked dreadful most of the time, probably thinking of the prophecy and danger. Echopaw kept trying to convince her that everything would be alright, but she still looked scared all the time. Her parents became worried about her and kept asking Goldheart if anything was wrong. Goldheart just replied that she was a little stressed about memorizing all the herbs, but it didn't look like they had believed him.

Aspenleaf was all healed up, no infections whatsoever. She had been exercising with Creekfall every day and was told by Goldheart that she could do warrior duties again, but she had to come to the medicine cats' den for a check-up every night before she went to sleep, to make sure she wasn't doing something to reopen the wound.

Echopaw was now heading for the camp entrance, going to fetch some fresh moss for the nursery. She passed Aspenleaf and Creekfall, sharing a blue jay by the sunning-stones. Whisperpaw was out on the dawn patrol with Gravelpelt, Sparrowtail, and Sunfur. Echopaw longed to go with them, but knew that in a few days she could, since the Gathering was very soon. Echopaw had

seen the moon last night, and it was nearly full. Echopaw's paws tingled with excitement as she thought about training again, and possibly being able to go to the Gathering.

Echopaw saw Twigfoot and Eveningstar talking with Prairiefoot and Meadowheart over by the High-stone. Then Eveningstar nodded and meowed, "I'll lead one hunting patrol, and Copperleaf can lead the other. We leave when the dawn patrol returns."

Echopaw continued to pad toward the bramble bushes, but was stopped by Twilightfoot. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the stream, to get fresh moss for the nursery and elders," she told him.

"Alright," he nodded, then padded back toward the clearing.

Hailkit had overheard this and came bounding up to Echopaw. "Need help?"

Echopaw nodded gratefully, "Thanks. Make sure it's alright with Moonshine first."

Hailkit trotted away toward Moonshine. Echopaw saw him nodding and meowing something to his mother, then he came back toward Echopaw and told her the answer she had hoped for, "She said it was alright."

Echopaw purred and lead the way out of camp. The forest was turning all shades of yellow, orange, and red. A cool breeze whispered through the trees, and the birds sang along with it. Leaf-fall was definitely approaching.

Echopaw turned around and was about to tell Hailkit to hurry up, but he wasn't there. She looked around, trying to locate him; she knew he was hiding and was going to jump out and scare her, typical Hailkit behavior. He hadn't even started training and he was already good at being quiet while he snuck through the forest. Echopaw scanned the bushes for his pelt, which should have been easy to find, since it was gray and white, but couldn't find him.

Then all of a sudden she was knocked over from behind and she

landed in a pile of moldy leaves. Hailkit was now on top of her, laughing his head off. Echopaw scowled and meowed, "We're *supposed* to be collecting moss, you stupid furball. This is my punishment, it isn't supposed to be fun."

"It can be fun if you make it. Oh stop being such a downer! Learn to have a little fun!" replied Hailkit, still laughing.

Echopaw gave up arguing and burst out laughing, and the two rolled over in the leaves, making them fly up everywhere. It was the most fun Echopaw had had in what seemed like *ages*.

After a few moments, Echopaw sat up, shaking leaves and dust from her pelt, and meowed, "Okay, we should actually go get the moss now. The Clan is going to get suspicious soon if we don't hurry up."

Hailkit nodded, shaking his pelt too, flinging dust and leaves everywhere. They padded off again, passing the Great Pine, and coming closer to the stream.

Echopaw meowed, "Last cat to the stream is crow-food!" and raced off toward the stream.

"Hey!" exclaimed Hailkit, and he sprinted after Echopaw.

Echopaw weaved through the trees, Hailkit on her tail. She sprinted faster, but he caught up, and Echopaw realized that he was a really fast runner. They raced side by side through the forest, their pawsteps matching one another. Echopaw looked ahead and saw the stream. She looked at Hailkit, his chest heaving as his claws gripped the earth and pulled him forward.

The stream was now only a few fox-lengths away. Hailkit was ahead of Echopaw by a tail-length. Echopaw tried to catch up, but Hailkit was faster; he sprinted forward and leapt over the stream, clearing it perfectly. Echopaw gathered up speed and followed him. She landed next to him and they both fell over, their chests heaving as they caught their breath.

When Hailkit had caught his breath, he teased, "I win! You're a dirty, smelly piece of crow-food!"

Echopaw purred, "Oh, shut up," through heavy breaths. She sat up and saw that the stream was still flooded, and it was rushing pretty fast. She bent down and gulped down the fresh, cool water gratefully. Hailkit sat down next to her and lapped up the water as well.

Echopaw sat up, licking drops of water from her chin, and meowed, "We'd better get that moss now."

Hailkit nodded and followed Echopaw downstream toward a large patch of moss. Claw marks filled the dirt where some of the moss had already been dug up by Echopaw in the last few days. Echopaw told Hailkit to get the elders' moss, and she'd get the moss for the nursery. They both headed separate directions, Echopaw searching for the softest moss for the nursery. Once she found a patch of really soft moss by an aspen tree, she dug it up and made a pile of it. It was moist, so Echopaw would have to leave it out in the clearing so the sun could dry it.

After Echopaw had harvested enough moss, she gathered it up and carried it toward Hailkit, who was digging up a patch over on a rock by a pine tree. She dropped her moss next to him and asked, "Is that moss dry for the elders? I'll be in *big* trouble with the elders if it's even the slightest bit damp."

Hailkit nodded, his whiskers twitching with amusement, and ripped another piece from the rock, adding it to his pile. Hailkit looked up and meowed, "I think that's enough, don't you?"

Echopaw nodded and grabbed her moss with her teeth, being careful not to get it wet. Hailkit had his moss clamped between his jaws and flicked his tail, signaling for Echopaw to lead the way.

Echopaw turned and remembered that they were on the other side of the stream; they had jumped over it during their race. "Mouse-dung! We'll drop it for sure if we try and jump it!" She exclaimed through a mouthful of moss.

"Isn't there a log somewhere where we can cross over it?" Hailkit asked, and Echopaw hardly understood him since he had so much moss in his jaws.

Echopaw turned and started heading upstream, meowing to Hailkit, "Yeah, there is. It's upstream a bit." They walked through the forest, the wind whistling through the trees, and Echopaw looked up through the red, orange, and yellow leaves at the sky. Clouds now filled it, light gray and fluffy.

Echopaw now saw the old log and started running toward it, Hailkit following. Echopaw put her paw on the log, but the wind picked up and the trees swayed to and fro. Echopaw saw the forest darken and she became confused; it was barely sunhigh, how could the forest be getting so dark? Echopaw looked up and saw that the clouds were now dark gray, and were moving in fast. Echopaw thought it looked similar to how the last storm had started a half-moon ago. She recalled what her mother had said: 'Those clouds signal a coming thunderstorm, with pouring rain, cold winds, and sometimes even hail. It's dangerous for a cat to be out in a thunderstorm, especially if it's hailing'. Echopaw looked back at Hailkit and saw her own alarm reflected in his eyes. With the wind like it was, they could easily fall into the stream and lose all of their moss, and, worse, they could get seriously injured. *At least we're not crossing the river*, thought Echopaw, trying to stay positive.

Echopaw realized that the wind was picking up even more. If they didn't hurry, they would never make it across the log. She looked at it; it was about five fox-lengths long. Echopaw swallowed nervously and unsheathed her claws, getting a tight grip on the log.

"One at a time!" she yowled back at Hailkit over the rising wind. Once he understood her, his look of alarm was replaced by a look of sheer terror.

"What if you fall in?" he yowled back, sounding terrified, but Echopaw ignored it. They *had* to hurry. Echopaw's claws gripped the log and she crouched low, her belly dragging along it as she inched her way across. She was halfway there when a huge gust of wind blew through the forest, and she slipped, the moss falling from her jaws. She hung from the log, her legs dangling over the stream. Her claws scraped frantically along the log's surface, trying to find a grip. She prepared to fall into the stream, when she saw Hailkit running up onto the log, and he grabbed the scruff of her neck. He hoisted her up, and Echopaw's claws finally found a grip.

She pulled herself up and nodded her thanks to Hailkit, who just nodded and yowled over the rising wind, "Let's go! I'm right behind you!"

Echopaw turned and faced the log again. She gulped. Her claws gripped the log tightly, and she slowly stalked across the log. Every now and then Hailkit would meow, "You're doing good!" or "Keep going!"

She heard large splashes as the stream carried its water along faster in the wind, and, soon, she couldn't hear anything but the rushing stream and the raging wind. It hurt her ears, so Echopaw angled her ears down and ignored it; she kept her focus on the task in front of her. Echopaw was almost there, she could see the edge of the log. She stood up and jumped. She turned around so Hailkit could jump too, but when she turned, he wasn't there.

"Hailkit!" she yowled, but only the rising wind and rushing stream answered her call. "Hailkit! HAILKIT! NO!"

She ran along the stream searching for him, for any sign of a white and gray pelt in the currents. *Please don't be dead! Please!* she prayed to StarClan.

She ran and ran, scanning the stream for him, but no white and gray fur ever appeared. She desperately tried to speed up, but the stream was rushing faster than she was running, and running against the raging wind didn't help. It was hopeless, and Echopaw realized that Hailkit would already be way far away downstream. He was gone. She sat down under a pine tree and started to wail, "NO!" She closed her eyes, not intending to ever get up. He was gone. Echopaw started crying, and realized that Hailkit had saved her, but she couldn't save him. Echopaw felt terrible; he was gone. Echopaw looked up and saw rain falling from the sky, as if the sky was crying for Hailkit too. Echopaw curled up closer to the tree, avoiding the splashing raindrops. She shivered, but didn't notice.

The rain picked up, and started falling through the branches of the pine tree. Echopaw didn't care; she cried with the sky, not caring about anything else in the world. All that mattered was Hailkit, and how he had saved Echopaw's life. Echopaw looked up, a tear rolling

down her cheek, and saw that it had started to hail. Not the big, violent hail that fell during the last storm, but soft and gentle, like Hailkit. Echopaw sobbed even harder. It was as if the sky was mourning Hailkit, as if StarClan was sending a memorial for him.

Echopaw sat under the tree for a while, listening to the hail falling peacefully, and thought about Hailkit, his sparkling blue eyes, his sleek gray and white pelt. He had always thought of ways to make even the most boring thing fun, ways to make Echopaw smile. And now he was gone. Would she ever look into those sparkling blue eyes again? Would she ever see his gray and white fur again, or spend time laughing and playing with him again?

Echopaw didn't know how life could move on. She cried through the storm, holes tearing into her heart.

Then Echopaw heard a voice, calling for her.

"Echopaw!"

She looked up, but saw no sign of where the voice had come from. She was about to lay down and decided she had imagined it, when it called again.

"Echopaw!"

Echopaw looked out through the rain and saw Sparktail, Rustypelt, and Eaglefeather racing through the forest. "Echopaw! Oh I can't lose you again!" she heard Sparktail yowl.

Echopaw sat up and heard Eaglefeather call, "Rustypelt, Sparktail, I found her! Under that pine tree!"

The three of them raced toward her through the thick sheets of ice-cold rain. Sparktail licked her head and scolded, "What were you thinking?"

Echopaw started sobbing again and leaned into her mother, rubbing her head in her fur, not caring how soaked it was.

"Oh Echopaw! You had us worried sick!" her mother muttered.

"I... I was—" she tried to tell her through sobs.

"No explanations now. We have to get back to camp," soothed Sparktail.

"Where's Hailkit? Moonshine said he went with you," Rustypelt meowed worriedly, scanning the foggy forest around them.

Echopaw cried harder. "He's... He's g-gone..."

The three warriors exchanged horrified glances, then Rustypelt meowed something urgently under his breath, but Echopaw's ears didn't seem to be working anymore.

Eaglefeather meowed quickly, "Let's go," and jogged away from the tree, back toward camp with Rustypelt beside him. Echopaw followed, leaning against her mother for support. She stepped out into the rain and dragged herself along, sobbing the whole way there.

* * *

Echopaw woke up in the apprentices' den, Whisperpaw sitting next to her. When Whisperpaw saw that Echopaw was awake, she smiled. Echopaw hated her sister's nerve to smile, and turned away, a wave of grief and guilt washing over her as she recalled the events of earlier that day.

It was still raining, though the hail had let up. Echopaw angled her ears toward the den entrance and heard Cloverkit meowing something to Moonshine, probably about Hailkit, but she sounded relieved. Echopaw couldn't stand it anymore; why was every cat so glad that Hailkit was gone? It made Echopaw mad, even his own sister and mother were acting happy.

Echopaw turned to Whisperpaw and growled, "Why, in the name of StarClan, is every cat so happy Hailkit is gone, so happy that he's dead?"

Whisperpaw purred. "He's not dead, Echopaw!"

Echopaw's ears perked up with disbelief and amazement and

excitement. "He's not?"

Whisperpaw shook her head, "A search party found him on the stream's banks near the Thunderpath. He was unconscious, so they carried him back to Goldheart. He—"

Echopaw raced out of the den and into the rain, and never heard the rest of Whisperpaw's sentence. She ran toward the medicine cats' den, excitement filling her heart. Echopaw had never felt so happy in her life. She *was* going to see Hailkit again! She *was* going to see his bright blue eyes! She *was* going to see his gray and white pelt! She *was* going to hear his voice again, full of laughter and fun!

When she reached the medicine cats' den, she didn't even stop to ask if she could come in. She just burst inside and saw Goldheart standing over Hailkit, who was unconscious. Yellowpaw was in the corner, grabbing herbs. She didn't even seem shocked that her brother was lying on the floor, looking close to joining StarClan.

Echopaw ran to Hailkit's side and started to lick his head, murmuring, "I thought you were dead, I thought you were dead." She purred at the thought of Hailkit waking up again. She then silently thanked StarClan that Hailkit didn't die, and that he was safe back at camp.

Yellowpaw padded back toward Hailkit and Echopaw and meowed, "Echopaw, we're going to need to give him some herbs, to treat his injuries."

Echopaw's happiness turned to panic as she heard Yellowpaw say the word injuries. She meowed anxiously, "He's going to be alright, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's just got a sprained paw and he has a large gash on his left flank, so we'll need to give him some herbs for them. He will also be in severe shock when he wakes up; he was really close to dying," Goldheart meowed, coming to sit next to Echopaw.

Echopaw nodded at Goldheart and then turned to Yellowpaw. "Don't you ever feel scared when you look at him, your brother, who almost died?" she asked curiously.

Yellowpaw shrugged, but her eyes showed the sadness Echopaw knew she was trying so hard to hide. "I try not to think about *him*, only the healing part. Although I *was* scared that he was going to die for sure when Sparrowtail, Twilightfoot, Meadowheart, and Prairiefoot brought him back."

Goldheart turned to his apprentice and reassured her, "With you healing him, there's no way he will die." Then he licked her head, and turned to the shelf in the wall where the herbs were stored. He then started rummaging through them, picking out a large yellow-orange flower and some long and skinny green leaves.

Echopaw glanced confusedly at Yellowpaw for an explanation.

Yellowpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. She then meowed, "The orange flower is called marigold. It's good for stopping infection. The other leaves are from an elder tree, which are used for treating sprains."

Echopaw nodded in understanding and watched as Goldheart started chewing up the marigold. Then he motioned to Yellowpaw with his tail, and Yellowpaw jumped up and carefully turned Hailkit over.

Echopaw winced and recoiled as she saw Hailkit's gash. It was all the way from the back of his left hind leg and up to the middle of his back. It was bright red and had left a stain in the medicine cats' den floor where he had been lying before.

"Will that heal?" she asked Yellowpaw, her chest feeling hollow with fear.

Yellowpaw nodded, "Oh yeah; it's not that deep at all, it just *looks* bad. Aspenleaf's was a *lot* deeper. It's not about how large the gouge is, it's how *deep* it is. A short, deep gash is more dangerous than a long, shallow gash." Then she looked at Goldheart, who was putting the marigold on Hailkit's cut.

Echopaw nodded and was amazed at how much Yellowpaw had already learned.

"We're just giving him marigold because his cut *might* get infected; there's less of a chance that it won't, but you never know." Goldheart shrugged.

Echopaw looked down at the blood stain that was on the stone floor of the medicine cats' den. Echopaw became confused. "Didn't you say that his cut didn't lose much blood?" she asked Yellowpaw.

"Yeah, why?"

"That blood stain, it's—"

"Oh, that's dried blood from Aspenleaf. Hailkit's wound had already stopped bleeding when we started carrying him back. Aspenleaf lost blood while she was carried here and while she was in here, too. We were just scared Hailkit was already dead; but thank StarClan he wasn't."

Echopaw looked at Hailkit's chest, which was rising and falling in a steady rhythm. It almost looked as if he was sleeping. Echopaw turned to Goldheart and asked, "Has he been unconscious since you brought him back?"

"Well, kind of," replied Goldheart, "He has been drifting in and out of consciousness. When he *is* conscious, he's asleep. He sometimes talks in his sleep," Goldheart meowed.

"Really?" Echopaw laughed.

Yellowpaw nodded with amusement.

Echopaw meowed to the two medicine cats, "Okay, I'll leave you two to Hailkit. I've got to go." Yellowpaw looked up from what she was doing and nodded to Echopaw. Echopaw turned toward the den's entrance and padded toward the clearing. As she walked out, she turned around and asked, "He *will* be alright, right?"

"Yes, Echopaw, I'll make sure of it," Yellowpaw promised, then she looked back down at Hailkit.

Echopaw nodded one last time and padded out into the clearing, and saw that the rain had let up and the evening sun was shining on

the camp. Cats were gathered around in the clearing, still looking anxious from the fright of almost losing Hailkit, and Echopaw.

Echopaw turned and dragged herself over toward the fresh-kill pile, where Cloverkit sat with Moonshine. "Can I join you?" Echopaw asked when she reached them.

"Sure!" purred Cloverkit, "With Hailkit in the medicine cats' den and all, I haven't had any cat to play with, unless you count Raykit, but it's not the same as it is with you, Whisperpaw, or Hailkit."

Echopaw nodded, looking through the fresh-kill pile for a delicious meal, "Yeah, same here. Whisperpaw has been out hunting a lot lately, and I haven't even learned how to do that yet, or battle training." Echopaw sighed.

"Do you know when you're starting your training again?" Moonshine asked.

Echopaw looked up. With everything going on, she had forgotten about her training! "I don't know, actually. I'm going to go ask Bronzepelt. I'll be back."

Echopaw looked around camp for her mentor, but couldn't see him. She did see Sparrowtail and Aspenleaf sitting on the sunning-stones, sharing tongues.

Echopaw padded over toward them and asked, "Have you seen Bronzepelt?"

Sparrowtail looked up and meowed, "No, I haven't. Was he on one of the patrols?"

Echopaw shook her head. "No. Do you think he's in the warriors' den?"

Aspenleaf answered this time. "Last time I saw him he was with Sagetail and Raykit."

"Oh, alright. Thanks, I'll check the nursery then."

Echopaw padded away from the clearing and headed for the

nursery. When she reached it, she heard squealing and laughter coming from it.

"I can do the hunting crouch too! Look Mother! I'm better than *Father*!" Echopaw heard Raykit meowing.

Sagetail joked, "You call yourself a mentor, Bronzepelt? You're being beaten by a kit!"

"I hardly call myself a kit! I'm nearly an apprentice!" Raykit growled playfully.

"Not really," meowed Bronzepelt, laughing. "You're only three moons old! You've still got a while until you're an apprentice!"

Echopaw stepped inside and watched as Raykit pounced on Bronzepelt's back and yowled in triumph.

Sagetail purred with amusement. Then she looked up and saw Echopaw padding in. "Need something?" Sagetail asked.

"Yeah. I need to ask Bronzepelt something," she replied.

Sagetail looked confused then meowed, "Oh! Yes, he's your mentor. I'll tell him."

Echopaw sighed. That was a sign that she'd been away from her training too long.

She saw Sagetail telling Bronzepelt, and he meowed something to Raykit, who loudly complained, "Aw! But you'll never get to play with me; you're always so busy!"

"Not as busy as Twigfoot. Yellowpaw, Hailkit, and Cloverkit never got to play with him."

"Yeah, well—" complained Raykit.

"Listen to your father," meowed Sagetail sternly.

"Oh, alright," Raykit sighed.

Bronzepelt licked his son's head and turned toward Echopaw. "Let's go into the clearing."

Echopaw followed her mentor to the clearing. He asked, "You're going to ask me when your training starts again, aren't you?" His voice had a hint of amusement in it.

Echopaw shuffled her paws and replied, "Yes, and when I'm not responsible for taking care of the elders."

Bronzepelt replied, "Well, Eveningstar gave you the order of taking care of the elders; he'll have to decide when that punishment is up. I'll talk to him about it though. As for training, I think we can start again; *that* is up to me because I am your mentor."

Echopaw's ears perked up at this. She looked eagerly at the red warrior. "I can start training again?"

Bronzepelt purred with amusement. "Sure; you're pretty far behind. We can start again tomorrow. But remember," he reminded her, "just because you're starting training again doesn't mean you can forget about your punishment of taking care of the elders."

Normally still having to take care of the elders would have made Echopaw grumble with annoyance, but she didn't care; she would do whatever it took to start training again and become a warrior at the same time as Whisperpaw.

"I won't forget!" Echopaw promised, bouncing around. Excitement was bubbling inside her. She was going training again! Echopaw wanted to tell every cat the good news; she wanted to shout out how she was going to help her Clanmates, and protect them, and hunt for them. She wanted to race over and tell her sister, her mother, her father, and everyone!

Echopaw looked at Bronzepelt, and Echopaw thought he could read her mind. He nodded toward the apprentices' den, amusement in his eyes.

Echopaw turned and sprinted over to the apprentices' den, forgetting all about her half-eaten mouse. She raced past the

nursery, and came up to the heather bush den.

Suddenly Whisperpaw came out, and Echopaw nearly ran into her.

"IgettostarttrainingagainWhisperpaw!" she blurted out.

Whisperpaw just stared blankly at her. "What?" she asked, looking completely lost. "Slow down. I didn't understand any of that."

Echopaw waited until she caught her breath before she meowed again. "I... get..." she started, but had to catch her breath again. "I get... to... start... training again," she finally got out.

"Really?" Whisperpaw exclaimed, and when Echopaw nodded, she asked, "When?"

"Tomorrow!" Echopaw shared her sister's excitement. "Bronzepelt said so!"

"Wow!" Whisperpaw smiled, then it turned into a frown. "Do you still have to take care of the elders?"

"Yeah." Echopaw shrugged. "But I'd take care of the elders for the next five moons if that was the only way I'd be able to start training again. I'd have given anything to be able to catch up to you; I feel *so* behind! Also, I planned, ever since we were kits, that we'd become warriors together; that's how I envisioned it, and I don't want that to change. And I bet you and our parents don't either."

Whisperpaw laughed.

"What?" Echopaw asked.

Whisperpaw shrugged. "Oh, nothing."

Echopaw playfully stuck her tongue out at her sister and then jumped on her. They rolled in the dirt, kicking up dust.

The fun drove all negative thoughts from Echopaw's head. The last moon had been full of foreboding and near-death incidents: the prophecy, hitting the boulder in the river and washing up in NightClan, and Hailkit nearly drowning in the stream.

Echopaw kicked at her sister's stomach, her claws sheathed, but her teeth bared playfully.

"You two are acting like kits!" meowed a voice above them, sounding amused. Echopaw and Whisperpaw stopped play-fighting immediately and looked up at their mother. "Aren't you still responsible for the elders? Shouldn't you go get their fresh-kill now?" Sparktail asked.

"Yeah, but *I* get to start training again," Echopaw puffed out her chest proudly.

"I know, I heard," meowed Sparktail with approval and happiness. Then she looked up at the orange evening sky, deep in thought. "You know what? Today has been a rough and exhausting day. You can have the day off. I'll get the elders what they need tonight. You get some sleep." Sparktail bent down and licked Echopaw's head. Then she turned to both of them and meowed, "You *both* need sleep. Now, get to the apprentices' den and go to bed. You both have training tomorrow!"

Echopaw stared at her mother in surprise. Taking care of the elders was supposed to be *Echopaw's* punishment. But Echopaw took the offer and purred gratefully, "Thanks, Mother."

Sparktail purred and replied, "Of course."

Echopaw watched as her mother padded over to the fresh-kill pile, grabbing three mice for the elders.

"Come on," yawned Whisperpaw behind her. "I'm tired."

Echopaw nodded and replied, "Me too."

Whisperpaw lead the way toward the apprentices' den. Echopaw followed her sister across the camp, which was getting dark; the sunset was casting long shadows across the ground, making it harder to see.

Once they reached the den, Echopaw gratefully padded over to her nest and curled up in the soft moss. She stretched her legs, and after a few moments, she fell asleep.

Chapter 12

"No, not like that! You look like a stink bug!" exclaimed Bronzepelt. "Try it like this," he demonstrated, keeping his flank and tail flat to the ground.

Echopaw was out by the meadow, where Bronzepelt was teaching her the hunting crouch. She bent down flat against the ground and slowly stalked toward the daisy that Bronzepelt had told her to practice her hunting skills on.

"Good! Now lighten your pawsteps; put all your weight on your haunches."

Echopaw adjusted herself and silently slipped through the grass toward the daisy. It was much easier to learn the hunting crouch because Whisperpaw had taught her a bit of the hunting techniques each night during the time of her punishment.

"Great job!" her mentor praised, "Now, when you get within a few fox-lengths of your prey, you stop and prepare to pounce."

Echopaw padded a few footsteps closer to the daisy and stopped, not making a sound. She prepared to spring, her haunches rocking to and fro. Then she pushed off the ground and swiftly landed on top of the daisy, trapping it underneath her paws.

"Well done! First try and you've mastered it; you're a natural!" Bronzepelt purred.

Echopaw sat up straighter and pranced over toward her mentor, her head and tail raised proudly.

Then she heard the grass rustling with signs of movement, but it didn't sound like the wind had caused it. She paused and pricked up her ears. Bronzepelt stopped and turned toward the river, his nose wiggling back and forth, and his ears perked.

Echopaw followed her mentor's gaze and scanned the grass on DayClan's territory. Echopaw sniffed the air, but realized she was upwind, and she wouldn't be able to smell anything across the river.

Bronzepelt looked straight ahead, his nose no longer sniffing out what they had both heard, but his eyes narrowed. Echopaw turned back toward the river, and saw a flash a dark auburn fur, looking like her mother's vibrant coat. Echopaw looked at her mentor, confused. *Why would Sparktail be on DayClan's territory?* she wondered.

But the look on Bronzepelt's face made Echopaw realized that it was not her mother, nor another cat. Bronzepelt wouldn't get so worked up over a DayClan cat on DayClan's territory. Echopaw swallowed nervously and turned back to the river and tried to seek out whatever had made her mentor's face become so rigid.

Then she saw it. It had a bright red pelt, and a huge furry tail with white at the tip. It's muzzle was long and skinny, and it's teeth were bared, revealing a huge mouthful of razor-sharp fangs. Echopaw gasped and huddled closer to Bronzepelt, turning to him for an explanation.

Her mentor's fur and tail were bristled and his ears were flat against his head, displaying complete hostility. He arched his back and let out a loud hiss. Echopaw turned back to the creature in alarm. Bronzepelt seemed to have seen this type of creature before, and, by the way Bronzepelt was acting, it was dangerous.

Echopaw felt her neck fur begin to rise, and her claws dug into the dirt. No matter how dangerous this creature was, she would fight it off to protect her Clan. She let out a loud snarl and yowled, "Get lost you stupid, mangy, excuse for an animal!" The creature didn't stir. It just stared at them, it's teeth still bared and it's tail swishing back and forth.

Bronzepelt urgently whispered in Echopaw's ear, "Arch your back and look as big as possible. If we look threatening enough, hopefully it'll get the message that it's not welcome here and run away."

Echopaw nodded and bristled up her fur and arched her back. She laid her ears flat against her head, then bared her teeth and hissed loudly at the creature.

Bronzepelt did the same, and soon enough, the creature began to back down and close its mouth. Then it turned and fled toward the moorland with one last snarl.

Echopaw sat up triumphantly, and let her fur lie flat. She turned toward Bronzepelt and asked, "What was that?"

"A fox. They're vicious creatures. They steal kits and are a real threat to all cats, warrior or not. They don't kill just for food."

Echopaw shuddered. So that was what a fox looked like; she and her denmates had often joked about foxes, but she'd never known what foxes actually were. Then she thought of something, "Won't it be in DayClan's territory now? Will it attack them?"

Bronzepelt shrugged, "Who knows, we may have taught it a lesson, and it may try to find another meal instead of cats. But, with foxes, you just never know."

Echopaw nodded and permanently stored the image of the fox in her mind for later.

Bronzepelt turned to Echopaw and meowed, "Come on, we must tell the rest of the Clan. Just because we scared it off doesn't mean it won't come back." And he took off running back into the forest. Echopaw dashed after him, racing under the leaf-fall trees. She followed her mentor through their territory, and cleared the stream in one leap. She weaved around the Great Pine and slowed down as they reached the bramble bushes. Bronzepelt breathed heavily and nodded to Echopaw, then padded into the camp.

Echopaw followed him past the clearing and toward Eveningstar's den. They jumped up onto the High-stone and Echopaw sat outside the den and waited while Bronzepelt padded in, calling "Eveningstar?"

Echopaw jumped as Twigfoot meowed from the base of the High-

stone, "He's out on the hunting patrol. He left soon after you two did. He should be back soon."

Bronzepelt turned toward the deputy and meowed, "How soon do you think he'll be back? We have something important to tell him."

"Not too long. He left at sunhigh."

Echopaw looked up through the trees and saw the sun descending toward the horizon.

She nodded, then turned, leaping off of the High-stone after Bronzepelt. All the cats had their eyes on Echopaw and Bronzepelt; they hadn't expected them to return in such a hurry, or rush urgently to Eveningstar's den.

Bronzepelt padded across the clearing to join Sagetail, who was sitting outside the nursery. Raykit was beside her, chasing his tail in a patch of ferns. Echopaw decided to follow her mentor, trotting over to Raykit while Bronzepelt went over to Sagetail.

Bronzepelt began whispering something urgently to his mate, and Echpaw knew it was about the fox he and Echopaw had seen earlier.

Echopaw sighed, then turned just as Raykit stumbled right into her. The orange tabby kit looked up, but fell over in his dizziness. He recovered quickly and sat up again, shaking his head. "Hey, Echopaw! How was training?" he asked, curiosity in his orange eyes.

"It was great! I learned the hunting crouch," she told the eager young kit.

Raykit stuck out his chest. "I already know the hunting crouch. Father taught me!" he boasted.

"Oh yeah? Let's see then!" she challenged Raykit playfully.

Raykit crouched down and slowly stalked forward, his tail high and his paws dragging in the grass. It wasn't a warrior's hunting crouch, that was for sure, but Echopaw congratulated him anyways. "Wow!

You're almost better than me!" she joked playfully.

Raykit beamed and replied, "Well, I've got to get ready to become an apprentice! It's soon, you know! Right Mother?" he meowed proudly, turning to his parents, who had finished their conversation.

"Not really, little one. You're only three moons old," murmured Sagetail gently.

"Four," Raykit meowed.

"Yes, four on the next Gathering."

"How many sunrises until then?" Raykit asked excitedly.

"Two, I believe. Look at the moon when it comes up tonight. It's nearly full," replied Bronzepelt.

Echopaw's paws suddenly tingled with excitement. Two days until the Gathering! Her punishment with the elders was over in two days! Then all she and Whisperpaw would have to do would be to fetch fresh moss for the elders and to bring them fresh-kill, the ordinary apprentice duties. No more clearing out their dirt or searching for their tics, or doing it all by herself!

Echopaw looked around and saw the elders lying on the sunning-stones, deep in conversation. She thought of something.

She turned back to Raykit and meowed, "Keep practicing! I've got to go." She dipped her head to Sagetail and Bronzepelt then turned toward the sunning-stones and to the elders.

"Hello," she greeted them cheerfully as she reached them. "I just came to remind you that on the next full moon, Eveningstar said that my punishment is over. So, if you want anything, I'd be happy to get it. But, in two days, I can't anymore, except for on my apprentice duties when Bronzepelt tells me to."

Fogtail snorted and turned away from Echopaw. But Echopaw couldn't care less.

Spruceclaw purred with amusement and turned toward Ferrettail, who meowed something to Spruceclaw. Then, Ferrettail turned to Echopaw and meowed, "Well since you are offering, we'd like some fresh-kill."

Echopaw instantly regretted offering to get them something. Why couldn't they get it themselves? The fresh-kill pile was right across the clearing, barely four fox-lengths away from where the elders were now. She sighed inwardly and replied, "Alright, I'll be right back."

She padded slowly over toward the fresh-kill pile and picked out a vole, a thrush, and a blue jay. She gathered them up in her jaws and turned back to the elders.

She dropped the prey at Ferrettail's paws and dipped her head respectfully.

"Thank you, Echopaw," meowed Spruceclaw.

"Yes, we needed this. Thanks," Ferrettail nodded.

Fogtail grunted, but other than that, she didn't even budge or bother to say thanks. Echopaw scowled at her turned back and stalked away back toward the fresh-kill pile. She sat down, and browsed through the pile to find a meal for herself.

"Hey, Echopaw!" meowed a voice behind her. Echopaw turned around and saw Cloverkit trotting toward her.

"Hello. Where have you been?" she asked Cloverkit.

"In the medicine cats' den visiting Hailkit."

"Is he awake?"

"No, not yet. But Yellowpaw and Goldheart have said he'll wake up soon enough."

Echopaw nodded and reminded herself to go and visit Hailkit after she was done eating. Before she could pick anything out, however, Echopaw saw Eveningstar, Sunfur, Sparrowtail, Gravelpelt, and

Whisperpaw returning from their hunting patrol.

Echopaw meowed, "Got to go, Cloverkit!" as she raced toward the nursery, leaving Cloverkit confused. She passed her sister, who was in the returning patrol, looking confused at Echopaw's urgentness. But Echopaw ran around her and to the nursery. "Bronzepelt! Eveningstar is back!" she meowed into the nursery as she stood on the outside.

Bronzepelt emerged from the den a moment later, nodded to Echopaw, and jogged across the clearing toward Eveningstar. Echopaw quickly turned around and followed her mentor to the fresh-kill log, where the hunting patrol was dropping off their prey.

"Eveningstar!" Bronzepelt meowed urgently.

The DawnClan leader turned around and faced Bronzepelt, curiosity all over his face.

"It's important," Bronzepelt meowed.

Eveningstar nodded, looking worried, and replied, "Let's go into my den."

Bronzepelt dipped his head and asked, "Can Echopaw come? She's part of it."

Eveningstar replied, "Of course," and padded across the clearing towards the High-stone, Bronzepelt and Echopaw following. Eveningstar leapt up onto the High-stone effortlessly and disappeared into his den. Echopaw followed Bronzepelt as he jumped up as well. Echopaw paused at the entrance to Eveningstar's den, then cautiously stepped inside.

The den was very dark, and it took a few moments before Echopaw's eyes became used to it. When they did, she padded over and sat by Bronzepelt, facing her leader.

"Okay, what is it?" Eveningstar asked.

Bronzepelt took a deep breath, then began, "While Echopaw and I were out by the meadow, training, we saw a fox on DayClan's

territory. It looked hostile and well-fed; a full-grown warrior could easily become its next meal. Luckily it was on the other side of the river, or we probably would have become crow-food." Echopaw's eyes widened at this; she had never thought of it like that. She prayed to StarClan that the fox wouldn't find its way into DawnClan territory, or possibly the camp. "We scared it off, but we wanted to warn you so the patrols can keep a lookout, just in case it decides to wander back into our territory," Bronzepelt finished.

Eveningstar nodded, looking lost in thought. Finally he spoke, "I'll call a Clan meeting, and you can tell them what you saw. And there's something else, something that needs to be done after the next full moon, so I might as well do it today while I already have the Clan gathered."

"And what's that?" Bronzepelt asked, tilting his head to one side.

Eveningstar smiled. "You'll see."

Bronzepelt nodded, then added, "Oh, there's one more thing I've been meaning to ask you."

"Go on," Eveningstar prompted.

"Well, at the next full moon, you said Echopaw was done with her punishment of taking care of the elders. Is that still true?"

"Of course," replied the Clan leader, "I always keep my word, don't I?"

"Always." Bronzepelt dipped his head, then meowed, "We'll get going then, so you can call the Clan meeting."

Eveningstar nodded and Echopaw dipped her head, turning to follow her mentor out of the leader's den, leaping off of the High-stone and walking into the clearing. Bronzepelt turned and headed to the nursery, while Echopaw padded over to the sunning-stones, where Cloverkit was sitting with Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather.

Cloverkit turned, meowed something to the two warriors, and padded up to Echopaw, confusion in her eyes. "What was that all about?" she asked.

"You'll see, soon enough," Echopaw replied, sitting down with Cloverkit.

"Is Eveningstar calling a meeting for it?" Cloverkit asked.

"Yeah, and he said he needed to do something else, too; he was going to announce it after the Gathering, but he decided he's going to do it when he calls the Clan meeting today, while the Clan is already gathered."

"That makes sense, but what could it be?" Cloverkit wondered.

Echopaw shrugged; she had no idea.

Just then, Yellowpaw came racing towards them. "Hailkit is awake!" she yowled.

Cloverkit and Echopaw immediately got to their paws and ran after Yellowpaw toward the medicine cats' den. When they stepped inside, Twigfoot and Moonshine were huddled over Hailkit, licking him.

"Is Echopaw okay?" Hailkit asked.

"You've already asked that," soothed Moonshine, "Yes, she is."

"Where is she?" he asked.

Echopaw padded toward him. "Right here," she meowed, tears building up in her eyes. Twigfoot and Moonshine backed away to let Hailkit see Echopaw. His eyes glowed as he saw her, and Echopaw raced to his side and sat down by him, licking his ragged fur.

"I thought you had died!" she whispered, the tears spilling over, running down her cheeks. She started sobbing into his fur, "I thought you died. I thought you had left me forever."

Hailkit coughed. "I'm fine. Just... just a little sore."

Echopaw looked down at his sprained paw. "Can you walk?" she asked.

Hailkit shrugged, "I don't know. I haven't tried."

"What do you remember, about when you fell into the stream?" she asked him.

"Well, I remember slipping into the water, being sucked under, and when I came up for air, the log-bridge was gone. All I saw was water. And the wind made the stream faster. I hit something in the water and then I woke up in here," Hailkit told her.

"Well, at least you didn't hit your head. Luckily it was just your paw. And with Yellowpaw and Goldheart healing you, your paw will be back to normal in no time," she comforted him.

"Hopefully," Hailkit meowed.

Echopaw sniffled and returned his smile weakly.

"Don't worry, I'm alive," Hailkit laughed, licking his sore paw.

Then footsteps sounded outside of the den and Goldheart came back into the den, meowing, "You should try walking, Hailkit."

"I don't think I can," Hailkit replied.

"You're going to want to. Eveningstar is calling a meeting soon. He told me you should attend this one since you're awake now."

"Why?" asked Hailkit, but Goldheart had gone.

"Well, you might as well listen to the medicine cat," meowed Echopaw, helping Hailkit to his paws.

Hailkit shakily stood up and limped over toward the den's entrance, leaning against Echopaw for support. He wobbled each step of the way. But, finally, they reached the entrance, and Hailkit flopped over, gazing out into the clearing. "What did I miss while I was out?" he asked.

Echopaw turned to him. "Not much, actually: there's no new news about DayClan. Come on, let's go into the clearing, where we can find you a place to sit during the Clan meeting. The Clan will like to

see you healthy and walking."

"Limping is more like it," Hailkit meowed through gritted teeth as he got to his paws again.

Echopaw helped Hailkit out into the clearing, every cat turning to look at them as they passed.

Raykit squealed happily. "Hailkit! You're back! You should sit next to me during the Clan meeting!"

Hailkit managed to smile at Raykit as he sat down next to him. "Thanks," he breathed, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Raykit beamed and looked up at his mother, who nodded at her son approvingly.

Cloverkit and Yellowpaw appeared from behind Sagetail, trotting up to Hailkit. Echopaw noticed that Yellowpaw had a vole in her jaws. She dropped it at Hailkit's paws and meowed, "You need to eat."

Hailkit looked down at the vole and pushed it away with a paw. "I'm not hungry."

Yellowpaw pushed it back toward her brother. "That's a medicine cat's order," she meowed sternly.

Hailkit sighed and rolled his eyes. He bent down and took a small bite out of the vole. Yellowpaw nodded with satisfaction and went back with Cloverkit toward Moonshine and Twigfoot, a little further to the right of Echopaw and Hailkit.

Hailkit looked up to make sure that Yellowpaw had gone, then turned to Echopaw and whispered in her ear, "She's become such a bossy furball lately, have you noticed?"

Echopaw stifled a laugh and replied, "She's just trying to help you heal, you know."

Hailkit shrugged, taking another bite from the vole.

"Look!" Raykit suddenly meowed, "Here comes Eveningstar."

Echopaw looked up and saw the DawnClan leader sitting atop the High-stone with his tail wrapped neatly around his paws. Bronzepelt sat next to him, and, when Bronzepelt nodded, Eveningstar yowled, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!"

Cats who weren't already sitting beneath the High-stone immediately appeared from their dens.

Once every cat was gathered, Eveningstar continued, "Today, I have two things to announce: one good and one somewhat bad. We'll start with the bad news." He turned, nodding to Bronzepelt.

Bronzepelt dipped his head and turned to face the Clan. "Okay, to jump right to the point: today, while Echopaw and I were out training in the meadow, we saw a fox."

Many cats gasped and turned to each other, meowing in hushed voices. Echopaw saw Sagetail wrap her tail protectively around Raykit. Aspenleaf looked at Creekfall with fright in her eyes, and Creekfall licked her ruffled fur, meowing to her soothingly.

When the noise died down, Bronzepelt continued, "Luckily it was on the DayClan side of the river, so we didn't have to fight it off. But it looked strong and healthy, and a warrior, not to mention an apprentice or a kit, could easily become its next meal.

Eveningstar stepped forward. "Bronzepelt, Twigfoot, and I talked and we've agreed that kits are not to leave the camp, not even to get a drink from the stream. Apprentices are not allowed out of camp unless accompanied by a warrior. And all warriors will not leave camp alone. The fox could easily make any cat its prey, and we can't afford to lose any cat, especially this close to leaf-bare approaching."

Twigfoot stood up from the crowd. "Also, all patrols must keep an eye open for the fox, whether it's a hunting patrol, evening patrol, or dawn patrol. That's part of the routine now. Until we know for sure that the fox is gone, we all have to look out for it; it may even

have kits of its own."

Eveningstar nodded at his deputy, then meowed something to Bronzepelt, who dipped his head and leapt off of the High-stone to join the rest of his Clanmates.

Once Bronzepelt sat down, Eveningstar continued. "Now, for the second part of the meeting. I was going to save this for after the Gathering, but why wait when I already have the whole Clan gathered here?" He paused, then meowed, "I think it's time Hailkit and Cloverkit were made apprentices," Eveningstar meowed, smiling at the look of disbelief and excitement on Hailkit's face.

"So that's why Goldheart wanted you to walk out here!" Echopaw meowed.

Cloverkit bounded over toward Hailkit, her eyes full of excitement. "I was going to tell you, but Moonshine and Twigfoot wanted to surprise you!"

Hailkit got to his paws, a little wobbly at first, but he soon steadied and, leaning against his sister, limped up to the High-stone. Echopaw wasn't sure he'd be able to make it up on top of the High-stone, but he seemed to let go of all his pain, determination gleaming in his eyes, and he jumped swiftly onto the High-stone, unsheathing his claws for support.

Eveningstar nodded to him and watched as Cloverkit joined them. Eveningstar turned toward Cloverkit and meowed the traditional words. "Cloverkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Cloverpaw. And your mentor will be Meadowheart." Meadowheart proudly came forward and leapt up onto the High-stone. "Meadowheart, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Sunfur, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Cloverpaw."

Meadowheart nodded and turned to Cloverpaw. Cloverpaw raced forward and touched noses with her new mentor. The small black she-cat's eyes gleamed with pride and joy. She looked at her mentor, who nodded encouragingly to her. And together, they

padded over to the side of the High-stone, so Eveningstar could apprentice Hailkit.

Eveningstar smiled encouragingly to Hailkit and meowed, "Come here, Hailkit." Hailkit determinedly limped forward to face his leader. He sat up straight, his black and white pelt puffed out and his head raised in determination. "Hailkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Hailpaw."

Hailpaw lifted his chin even higher and looked at Eveningstar with pride.

"Your mentor will be Prairiefoot," Eveningstar announced, and Prairiefoot proudly trotted toward the High-stone and swiftly leapt up to join his leader and his new apprentice.

"Prairiefoot, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Twigfoot, so I expect you to pass on all you know to Hailpaw."

Prairiefoot nodded and turned to Hailpaw, who stumbled forward anxiously to greet his mentor. They touched noses, Hailpaw's blue eyes blazing with determination and happiness.

Cloverpaw and Meadowheart joined Hailpaw and Prairiefoot beside Eveningstar while the Clan called out the apprentices' new names.

"Hailpaw! Cloverpaw!" Echopaw yowled.

Cloverpaw leapt off the High-stone, followed more slowly by Hailpaw. Echopaw raced forward and licked Hailpaw's shoulder and Cloverpaw's ear. "Congratulations!" she purred.

Yellowpaw rushed forward to meet them next. "Now we're all apprentices! Congratulations!"

"We're so proud of you!" purred Twigfoot as Moonshine licked her kits' heads.

After the crowd had died down, Echopaw showed Hailpaw and

Cloverpaw the den.

"Wow!" Cloverpaw exclaimed.

"We get to sleep with you again!" Hailpaw purred.

Whisperpaw nodded. "And tomorrow, you get to take a tour of our territory! Like we did the first day of our training!"

Hailpaw suddenly became downcast. "I probably won't with this sprained paw."

"Yeah, but I expect sprained paws don't take that long to heal," Cloverpaw comforted her brother. "And Goldheart healed you while you were still unconscious, so it shouldn't take that much longer!"

Hailpaw shrugged, sighing. "Yeah right."

Echopaw suggested, "Let's go and ask Goldheart right now!"

Hailpaw mumbled, "Oh, alright," and limped toward the medicine cats' den. Echopaw followed him as he slowly padded across the clearing.

When they reached the den, Echopaw called, "Goldheart? Hailpaw and I have a question."

Goldheart immediately came out of the den and replied, "Of course. Come on in."

Hailpaw limped in, Echopaw following. They sat down by Hailpaw's temporary nest, and Echopaw asked, "We were wondering how long until Hailpaw's sprained paw is healed."

Goldheart sat in thought and meowed, "In a few sunrises you'll probably be able to leave this den. But your paw probably won't be completely healed until at least ten to fifteen sunrises."

Hailpaw sighed and muttered something that Echopaw couldn't hear.

"Oh come on Hailpaw; it's only fifteen sunrises; that's a half-moon! I

had to be confined to camp for a whole moon, and I'm behind!" Echopaw tried to cheer him up.

Hailpaw grumbled and sighed.

"Come on, it's not that bad! Cheer up!"

"How can I? I get to be apprenticed today, but can't start training until many, many sunrises from now!"

"Have you got bees in your brain? You don't want to train with a sprained paw, it'll never heal like that!" Echopaw exclaimed.

"Yeah, after falling into the stream, I probably did get bees in my brain," sighed Hailpaw.

"You didn't, Hailpaw. You're perfectly fine besides your sprained paw," meowed Goldheart. "If you want to leave camp, you can come with me and Yellowpaw to collect some herbs tomorrow. We won't be moving fast, and you'll get a somewhat tour of our territory."

"Thanks, but I'll just stay here," muttered Hailpaw.

"You need to exercise on it, but not too much, if you want to start training. So, I'd advise you to come with me and Yellowpaw tomorrow." Goldheart insisted, in a tone that suggested it was an order.

"But you said I can't walk. If I can't take a tour of our territory, how come I can collect herbs with you?" Hailpaw growled.

Goldheart sighed. "Because we won't be going that far. The tour around our whole territory is a much further distance than just coming to collect herbs within the territory. We won't even be going that far! Most of the herbs grow near the stream."

Hailpaw sighed, "Alright, I'll come."

"Good," nodded Goldheart approvingly, "Now, Echopaw, you should go to your den and get to sleep. Hailpaw needs to rest, too, but he's staying here for a little while longer."

"Alright," Echopaw dipped her head, then turned to Hailpaw, "Goodnight then. See you tomorrow." She padded closer to him and licked his head, "It's not that bad. Just listen to Goldheart."

Hailpaw smiled and licked Echopaw's ear in return, "Goodnight."

Echopaw turned and padded out of the medicine cats' den and found her mother, father, and sister sitting by the fresh-kill pile. Echopaw walked over to them, remembering how she hadn't had time to eat earlier.

"Hey," she meowed as she reached them.

"Oh, hi, Echopaw," Sparktail meowed through a mouthful of food.

Echopaw sat between her sister and her father. She looked through the pile and found a plump mouse.

"I caught that," Whisperpaw bragged.

"I would have caught something today, but we saw that fox," Echopaw meowed stiffly.

"And it's a good thing you did," Rustypelt told her, "Or else we would be patrolling and sending cats everywhere without even knowing that there's a fox out there."

Echopaw blinked. She looked down at her mouse and took a bite. Then she peered through the trees and saw the sun setting on the horizon. "Has the evening patrol left yet?" She asked.

"Yeah. Eaglefeather, Copperleaf, Creekfall, and Aspenleaf went."

"Aspenleaf went?" Echopaw asked, surprised.

"Yeah. She's all healed up. She's back on warrior duties now. I think Goldheart told her this morning," replied Sparktail.

"That's great!" purred Echopaw. Now that Aspenleaf was back to normal, the DayClan cats would have to watch out for them next time. "You know what, we haven't seen or smelled or heard any sign of DayClan lately. I wonder why?"

Rustypelt shrugged, "I bet they're still recovering from the flood. We'll see in two days whether they have enough prey or not. If they're really scrawny, we'll have to watch out."

Whisperpaw shivered. "I hope they are well-fed. We don't need DayClan trying to take over our territory." Echopaw nodded, agreeing.

Sparktail looked at the sky, which was fading from orange to pink. Echopaw followed her mother's gaze and watched the clouds change color in a brilliant sunset like fire burning the sky before dark. "You two had better get to bed," meowed Sparktail, looking back down at Echopaw and Whisperpaw. Echopaw nodded in agreement, and Whisperpaw yawned.

Sparktail purred with amusement and meowed, "Goodnight, my kits."

Echopaw grumbled, "We're not kits."

"I know. You're growing up so fast."

Echopaw and Whisperpaw exchanged glances.

Not fast enough! Echopaw thought. *I want to be a warrior now!*

Chapter 13

Sunlight was slipping through the branches of the apprentices' den. Echopaw rolled over away from the sun and pushed herself up. Her eyes closed in a long yawn, and when she opened them her heart jumped in fright. Cloverpaw was sitting on the corner, staring at her.

"Don't do that! You scared me!" Echopaw hissed through heavy breaths. She bent down to lick her ruffled fur, realizing that she'd forgotten Cloverpaw slept in the apprentice's den now.

Cloverpaw purred with amusement. "I didn't do anything."

Echopaw grunted and asked, "How long have you been awake?"

"Oh, way before sunrise," replied Cloverpaw as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"A little excited, were you?" Echopaw teased.

Cloverpaw shuffled her paws. "A bit."

"Aren't you taking a tour of the territory today?"

"Yeah, but Meadowheart said we'd leave at sunhigh because she was assigned to the dawn patrol."

"Oh. What time is it now?" Echopaw asked.

"A little past sunrise," Cloverpaw replied. "Have you ever been on a patrol?"

Echopaw sighed, "No, not yet. But I will soon."

Cloverpaw nodded. "Want to share a meal?"

"Sure!" Echopaw purred.

As they left the den, carefully stepping around Whisperpaw, Echopaw saw Aspenleaf and Creekfall talking excitedly with Copperleaf, Sparktail, and Gravelpelt.

"I wonder what all the excitement is about?" asked Cloverpaw.

Echopaw shrugged, "Let's go and see."

Cloverpaw veered away from the fresh-kill log and headed toward the group of warriors, Echopaw following.

Echopaw sat next to her mother and whispered in her ear, "What's all the excitement about?"

Sparktail turned to her daughter and purred, "Why don't you ask Aspenleaf yourself?"

Echopaw looked over at Aspenleaf, who was looking right back at her. "Uh," she started shyly, "What is all this excitement about?"

Aspenleaf looked as if she was bubbling over with anticipation and amazement, and she couldn't control her happiness. When she spoke, it was slurred and so fast that Echopaw couldn't make out what she was saying. "Immamom!"

Echopaw looked at Cloverpaw, who shrugged; neither of them had understood what she had said. Echopaw turned back to Aspenleaf and asked, "Uh, what?"

Aspenleaf took a deep breath and told them more slowly this time, but still just as excited. "I'm having kits! I'm going to be a mother!" she purred.

"And I'm a father!" announced Creekfall excitedly.

Aspenleaf purred louder than Echopaw thought was possible. Echopaw purred with amusement and flicked her tail, signaling to Cloverpaw that they should get their meals now.

As they walked towards the fresh-kill log, Cloverpaw meowed, "Finally the Clan is getting more kits. Hopefully they'll be born in time for Raykit to actually be able to play with them."

"Yeah, he's been pretty lonely with no littermates."

"Hey! Hailpaw and I were there to play with him!"

"Yeah, but still."

"Huh," sighed Cloverpaw as they reached the fresh-kill pile.

Echopaw saw a plump squirrel and her stomach growled; it looked really tasty, so she started to grab it. As she locked its tail between her jaws, it became stuck and she couldn't pull it out of the pile. She yanked, but it just wouldn't come loose.

"Hey, this squirrel is stuck!" exclaimed Cloverpaw through a mouthful of fur, just as Echopaw was about to say the same thing.

Echopaw looked up to see Cloverpaw holding a squirrel by its neck, and Echopaw was holding her own squirrel by its tail. Echopaw realized with a smile that they were both holding the same squirrel. Echopaw bit back a laugh as she let go of the squirrel, and Cloverpaw lost her balance from the momentum, falling onto her back with the squirrel dangling from her jaws.

"Got it!" she meowed as she got to her paws again.

"You mouse-brain!" Echopaw laughed. "We were both holding the same squirrel, and when I let go, you were launched backwards!" She doubled over, laughing so hard that she could hardly breathe, so she was taken by surprise when Cloverpaw pounced on her.

The black she-cat pinned her to the ground and growled, "It is not funny. Stop laughing."

"You should have seen yourself!" Echopaw laughed harder, to which Cloverpaw scowled.

"What's so funny?"

Echopaw and Cloverpaw turned to see Whisperpaw padding toward them, yawning.

"Finally! You slept like a hibernating fox!" meowed Cloverpaw.

Whisperpaw shrugged, "I was tired. But nevermind that. What are you laughing about?"

Echopaw told Whisperpaw the story of Cloverpaw being launched backwards, pausing every few moments to laugh. Cloverpaw scowled the whole time, her eyes narrowed at Echopaw. When Echopaw finished, Whisperpaw burst out laughing.

"I wish I could have seen that!" she exclaimed through laughs.

Cloverpaw grunted.

"Come on! It was hilarious! You have to picture how you looked!" Echopaw exclaimed.

Cloverpaw sat in thought and finally mumbled, "Yeah, I guess I probably did look pretty funny."

Echopaw nodded. "You did!" And she burst out laughing again.

"Do you want to actually eat the squirrel instead of laughing about this?" Cloverpaw growled, sounding exasperated.

Echopaw's stomach growled and she nodded, "Sure. You and I can share it."

Cloverpaw picked the squirrel up off of the ground and carried it to Echopaw. Whisperpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile and brought back a finch for herself. The three of them sat side by side as they ate their meals in silence.

When Echopaw finished, she suggested, "Let's go visit Hailpaw! He's bound to be quite lonely in the medicine cats' den."

"Good idea," agreed Cloverpaw, and she turned, padding away toward Goldheart's den. Echopaw looked at Whisperpaw, and, together, they followed Cloverpaw to Goldheart's den.

When they got there, however, they saw that neither, Goldheart, Yellowpaw, nor Hailpaw were in there.

"What? Where are they?" exclaimed Cloverpaw as she peered

through the den entrance.

"Oh, they're out looking for herbs by the stream," meowed Echopaw, suddenly remembering.

"They are?" asked Cloverpaw.

"Yeah, they decided that last night when Hailpaw and I went to ask Goldheart about Hailpaw's sprained paw."

"Oh," meowed Whisperpaw. "Well, let's go and find something to do while we wait for our mentors."

"Alright," replied Echopaw, and they padded over toward the clearing.

As they reached the clearing, Echopaw saw Aspenleaf sharing a mouse with Creekfall, their tails entwined and their pelts touching. Echopaw smiled to herself and thought, *Their kits are going to have great parents.*

Once they reached the fresh-kill pile, Echopaw realized that the sunning-stones weren't occupied by a cat like they usually were. The elders were always here, especially on a warm, sunny days like this one.

"Hey, no one's at the sunning-stones! We should take them before any other cat does!" she whispered to Cloverpaw and Whisperpaw.

Cloverpaw looked around and nodded. "Yeah, I wonder where the elders are?"

"Who knows?" shrugged Echopaw, "But we should take advantage of the sunning-stones before any other cat does!"

"Yeah!" agreed Whisperpaw.

"But what if we get in trouble because one of the elders had them first?" asked Cloverpaw in a hushed and urgent whisper.

"Yeah, and why would that happen? We can just move if it's the elders," Echopaw replied, getting more impatient by the heartbeat.

"If we don't go now, we won't be able to at all!"

"Alright, let's go," nodded Whisperpaw, and she jogged over to the sunning-stones.

"I don't like this..." Cloverpaw warned.

"Suit yourself then," replied Echopaw, racing after her sister.

"Okay, okay! I'm coming!" called Cloverpaw, and Echopaw heard pawsteps racing after her.

Echopaw stopped at a stone and put her paw on it. It felt warm and relaxing on her pads, and she slowly climbed up on one and laid down on her side, basking in the warmth of the sun.

"These are so nice!" exclaimed Whisperpaw as she laid down on one too.

Echopaw watched as Cloverpaw looked hesitantly around the camp and cautiously settled down on the third stone. She looked around at it then meowed, "Yeah, these are pretty nice."

"See?" purred Echopaw.

She laid down and stared up at the clear blue sky, the sun shining through the trees; it was nearly sunhigh. Echopaw watched the red, orange, and yellow trees sway in the gentle breeze, leaves blowing off of them and landing gracefully in the camp, filling the forest floor with their rainbow colors.

Echopaw looked down and watched as Raykit squealed in excitement, jumping into the air and catching leaves as they swirled from the trees. Echopaw purred with amusement and saw Creekfall and Aspenleaf looking at him and laughing to themselves, their faces full of adoration; clearly they couldn't wait until their own kits were born. Echopaw turned her focus back to the sky and watched a flock of geese heading toward the mountains, migrating for when leaf-bare would come.

Then Echopaw heard a high-pitched squeal of surprise and turned abruptly toward the noise; Raykit had found something in the

heather bush of the nursery. Sagetail came padding up to him, looking amused.

"Look, I found a butterfly!" Raykit meowed excitedly, dropping into the hunting crouch. Sagetail purred with amusement and sat watching while Raykit pounced and missed. The butterfly flew off the bush and headed out toward the clearing, and Raykit chased it, jumping and batting at it with his forepaws, laughing. The butterfly continued to fly higher and Raykit raced forward and leaped. Echopaw sat up in amazement; Raykit landed with the butterfly in his paws. Cloverpaw's jaw dropped and Whisperpaw looked at Echopaw, her eyes wide.

Sagetail ran up to Raykit, surprise all over her face. "You caught that?"

Raykit looked down at his paws, amazement in his eyes. "Uh, I... I guess so." He stared at the dead butterfly on the ground, looking puzzled.

"How?" Sagetail insisted.

Raykit continued to stare at the butterfly, "I don't know. A... A voice in my head told me to catch it, so I jumped and then landed with it." Raykit now sounded really confused.

Echopaw got up and padded over to examine the butterfly. Whisperpaw got up and followed her, Cloverpaw close behind. Echopaw sat down beside Raykit, and looked down at the butterfly. It was about as big as a blue jay, and it was light blue, like the color of the sky.

Sagetail suddenly meowed, "What if it has a disease or something? Most kits couldn't just pounce that high like that and catch it. We should take it out of the camp, toward the Great Pine. Echopaw, you can take it out, but first wrap it up in a bundle of ferns. If it does have a disease, you don't want it in your mouth. I may not be a medicine cat, but I know when an animal looks sick."

Echopaw nodded and Whisperpaw spoke up, "I'll go with her and help her bury it." She caught Echopaw's eye and slightly nodded.

Echopaw became confused. What was this all about? Had Whisperpaw figured out something about the prophecy and wanted to use this time as a way to talk to Echopaw alone without disturbance?

"I'll go too," volunteered Cloverpaw.

"No," exclaimed Whisperpaw too quickly, and everyone looked at her in surprise. "I-I mean, you should p-probably stay here to help see if Raykit got any of it in his mouth. We don't need more than two cats to dig a hole." She avoided Cloverpaw's eyes while saying this.

"Fine," muttered Cloverpaw, sounding sad.

Please don't get angry with us! Oh, Cloverpaw there's probably something important Whisperpaw has to tell me! You'll understand it all one day!

Sagetail looked between the three of them with a confused look on her face, then added, looking worried, "I think a warriors should go with you," Sagetail meowed, "The fox is still out there and Eveningstar ordered that all apprentices must be accompanied by a warrior when leaving the camp."

"We'll be fine," Whisperpaw assured her, looking like she had ants in her fur because she was acting so anxious. "And besides, we're only going to bury a butterfly; we'll stay at the Great Pine, where we can still see the camp."

"Alright, then, go ahead," Sagetail finally nodded, still looking confused at the way Whisperpaw was acting.

Whisperpaw flicked her tail at Echopaw and Echopaw got up to follow her sister toward the camp entrance. "Aren't you forgetting the butterfly?" Echopaw asked her sister.

"Uh, we have to wrap it in ferns, remember?" Whisperpaw replied.

"Oh, right," meowed Echopaw, feeling dumb. She heard Whisperpaw laughing ahead of her, and Echopaw scowled.

"We'll each collect a mouthful," Whisperpaw ordered when they reached the clump of bracken by the camp entrance.

"Okay, Whisperstar," Echopaw muttered, but she obeyed her sister anyway.

Once they'd each collected a mouthful of the ferns, they turned and padded back to where Sagetail was sitting around the butterfly, making sure no cat went near it. Echopaw dropped the ferns and started laying them out so her sister could wrap up the butterfly in them. Whisperpaw grabbed a stick from the heather bush of the nursery and carefully pushed the butterfly onto Echopaw's pile of bracken, then she placed her own ferns on top and carefully grabbed the fern-wrapped butterfly in her jaws. Whisperpaw looked at Echopaw and nodded toward the camp entrance, motioning for her to lead the way.

Echopaw padded off toward the brambles and walked out of the camp, heading toward the Great Pine. Once she reached it, she stopped and turned around to find Whisperpaw padding up behind her.

Once her sister reached her, she dropped the bundle and meowed in a hushed voice, "Okay, I don't think that Raykit caught this butterfly by coincidence, and I don't think it's diseased either; I think he was supposed to catch it, which was probably why he did grab it so easily. He said a voice told him to catch it, and I'll bet you anything it was a StarClan warrior."

Echopaw narrowed her eyes, processing this. "Really? But why? What could it mean?"

"That's why I came with you; we should unwrap it and look for any hidden details; maybe it's a sign or something."

Echopaw nodded and watched as her sister unwrapped the butterfly from the bracken. When all the bracken was gone, the butterfly laid there, looking the same as it did when they had first wrapped it up: still big and light blue and dead.

Echopaw sighed, then sat down and stared at it, watching for

anything unusual, but nothing happened. They sat in silence for many, many heartbeats, and Echopaw started to get impatient. If something was going to happen, it'd better be soon, or some cat would notice they'd been gone too long and become either worried or suspicious. Echopaw looked up and saw the sun through the branches of the Great Pine; it had just passed sunhigh, and Bronzepelt had promised they'd go training after sunhigh.

Echopaw sighed and looked back down at the butterfly. Whisperpaw seemed to be starting to doubt her theory as well and looked over at the camp entrance, sighing.

It was then that Echopaw saw the butterfly changing before her eyes. She nudged Whisperpaw and meowed in a hushed whisper, "Look!"

Whisperpaw turned, amazement all over her face. Echopaw continued to stare at the butterfly; it was changing from its original blue color to yellow, orange, red, then black, like a sunset. Echopaw watched as a large white spot started to appear on the butterfly's wings. That's the moon! Echopaw realized, and when she looked closer, she saw that it was a full moon. Then, shapes started moving along the bottom of the butterfly's wings.

"Those are cats!" gasped Whisperpaw, and Echopaw nodded, realizing her sister was right. "Clan cats! Are they going to the Gathering?" Whisperpaw asked, more to herself than Echopaw.

Echopaw watched closely at the cats and saw that some had small white dots in their fur, like stars. "And some are StarClan cats!" she exclaimed.

Then slowly, the moon started turning red, looking evil in the sky instead of peaceful like it usually was. The cats at the bottom of the butterfly's wing started fading, completely disappearing from the scene, as if they were never there in the first place.

Suddenly the stars in the sky on the butterfly wing started falling, not like the normal shooting stars that Echopaw had seen when looking up at Silverpelt; these ones looked cold, like the stars in the sky were suddenly dying. They continued to fall, one after another,

until there were no more. Then, everything became pitch black. The only thing that remained to light up the dark new world was the blood-colored moon, and Echopaw shuddered.

Then the butterfly shriveled up before their eyes, the scene gone, and blew away with the leaves in the breeze, never to be seen again.

A horrid thought filled Echopaw's mind and she turned to her sister. "The falling stars represented StarClan!" gasped Echopaw, looking at Whisperpaw in shock.

"Well, remember," Whisperpaw murmured in a hushed voice, shaking her head and trembling all over, "StarClan not only has our ancestors, but it also holds our past, our ancient history; it holds our ways of life. So, the falling stars and the red moon represent our way of life being destroyed. Then, it will blow away; soon it will be no more than dust in the wind and no cat will remember it." Whisperpaw looked at Echopaw with fear in her eyes. "The prophecy is unfolding. Something bad will unleash upon the forest, and... and we will have to lead the Clans to stop it."

Echopaw widened her eyes, heart pounding.

Whisperpaw continued in a low voice, "This butterfly's wing is a *vision*, Echopaw; a vision from StarClan."

Chapter 14

When Echopaw and Whisperpaw returned to camp, trying hard not to show their shock at what they had just witnessed and discovered, they found that the dawn patrol had returned and Cloverpaw had already gone out on the tour with Meadowheart.

"How long do you think we have been gone? Do you think Sagetail knows we were up to something?" Whisperpaw hissed urgently in Echopaw's ear as they passed the nursery.

Echopaw shrugged, "I don't know. She'll probably think we were just trying to find a place to bury it. But we don't know how long we actually were. We didn't pay attention to time while out of the camp."

Whisperpaw meowed, "I guess so."

"What do you think they'd suspect we'd been doing? Obviously we didn't go to DayClan territory and back." Echopaw joked half-heartedly.

"I know, but still."

Echopaw and Whisperpaw walked past the sunning-stones and found Raykit chasing his tail by his mother. *At least he's back to normal*, Echopaw thought with a sigh of relief.

"Hey, look! Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt are back from the hunting and dawn patrols!" Whisperpaw meowed excitedly to Echopaw.

Echopaw followed her sister's gaze and found their mentors sitting with Twilightfoot, Sunfur, and Moonshine by the fresh-kill log. Bronzepelt looked up and flicked his ears at Echopaw, signaling to her that he'd be there in a heartbeat. Echopaw nodded and sat beside Whisperpaw while the warriors finished their conversation.

Before long, Bronzepelt got up and nudged Gravelpelt, who stood

up as well. Both warriors padded toward Echopaw and Whisperpaw, and then Gravelpelt meowed, "Sorry, I don't think we'll have time for training today; it's already too late in the day to start anything."

Echopaw tried to hide her disappointment as she replied, "Alright."

Bronzepelt must have noticed, because he meowed, "Don't worry. First thing tomorrow we'll go out and do some hunting practice."

Whisperpaw sat up in eagerness.

"Yay!" Whisperpaw and Echopaw exclaimed together.

Then Echopaw flattened her ears in embarrassment and meowed, "I mean, okay."

Gravelpelt and Bronzepelt's whiskers twitched with amusement as they turned and headed back toward Moonshine, Sunfur, and Twilightfoot.

Whisperpaw sat up and licked her chest. "When do you think Yellowpaw, Goldheart, and Hailpaw will get back?" she asked.

Echopaw had forgotten that the three had been out all day collecting herbs along the stream and throughout the rest of the territory. "Hopefully they didn't meet any troubles along the way," Echopaw fretted.

"Yeah, I hope not," Whisperpaw nodded. "What do you want to do now? It's a little ways past sunhigh, but we've got enough time until the sun sets."

Just then, Spruceclaw came padding up to them and meowed, "Hi, Echopaw, Whisperpaw." He nodded to both of them, then turned toward Echopaw. "Echopaw, I know you're excited about the Gathering and your training, but Fogtail and Ferrettail have started to complain about their old moss-"

"Oh I'm sorry!" Echopaw exclaimed, feeling guilt churn in her stomach. How could she have forgotten she still had to take care of the elders for her punishment? "I'll go get the stuff you want right

now! Oh, no...!"

"Stop. Look, Echopaw," Spruceclaw interrupted her, "it's okay. I understand why you'd forget. It's just that other cats will think you're avoiding doing it and making your mother do it instead."

"But I'm not!" meowed Echopaw, shocked.

"I know, but I'd go get new moss and some fresh-kill before your mother has a chance to do it, so Fogtail and Ferrettail know you're not avoiding the punishment."

"Okay, I will. I promise. Tell them I'll be back with the softest moss and the freshest, juiciest pieces of fresh-kill there are in the fresh-kill pile!"

"Alright, thanks, Echopaw."

Echopaw nodded and, as Spruceclaw turned and headed back toward the elders' den, muttered to Whisperpaw, "mouse-dung! I've been such a stupid furball! How could I have forgotten!"

"Come on, we'll go get the moss together. You're being too hard on yourself. It's only been, what, two sunrises? It's not that bad," Whisperpaw meowed, trying to comfort her.

"Alright, thanks," Echopaw meowed, thankful for her sister's company.

"First we have to get a warrior to accompany us because we're not allowed out of camp unless we have a warrior with us," Whisperpaw reminded her.

"Oh, right," sighed Echopaw, "Who do you think would go with us?"

"Um..." Whisperpaw scanned the camp. Twilightfoot, Gravelpelt, Moonshine, Bronzepelt, and Sunfur were still talking in their group; Aspenleaf was walking with Creekfall, Sparktail, and Prairiefoot to the fresh-kill pile; Twigfoot and Eveningstar were lounging by the Highstone, sharing a rabbit; Copperleaf, Sparrowtail, and Rustypelt were padding over to the leader and deputy, who nodded to them, then the four headed out of camp; they were probably the evening

patrol.

"How about we ask Sparktail?" suggested Echopaw. "We haven't spent much time with her in a while. I'm sure she'd be glad to take a walk outside of the camp with us."

"Good idea," nodded Whisperpaw approvingly.

Together, the two of them padded over toward Sparktail, who was sitting with Creekfall, Aspenleaf, and Prairiefoot. Their mother looked up when she heard her two kits approaching and asked, "Need something?"

Echopaw spoke up for both of them. "Yes. We were going to go collect moss for the elders by the stream, but we need a warrior to come with us, and we were wondering if you'd like to."

Sparktail's eyes brightened and she purred, "Of course! Let's go now!" She took the last bite of her mouse then got to her paws and turned to Creekfall, Aspenleaf, and Prairiefoot. "If any cat asks where we are, tell them we're at the stream."

"Alright." Aspenleaf dipped her head as Sparktail lead the way out of the camp with Whisperpaw following. Echopaw dipped her head to the warriors and ran after her mother and sister and out of camp.

She walked side by side with Sparktail and Whisperpaw as they headed for the stream. The trees above them swayed in the gentle breeze, a few leaves blowing off and landing on the ground. The three walked through the forest, the yellow, orange, and red leaves crunching beneath their paws.

Sparktail sighed, "You are growing up so fast. I remember when you were born; you were so tiny, and I never imagined you'd be apprentices. I mean, I knew it would happen one day, but I didn't imagine it would go by so fast."

Whisperpaw looked surprised, "It went by so slow for me! I wanted to be an apprentice the first time I set paw out of the nursery."

Sparktail purred with amusement, "I remember when you did first explore out of the nursery. You walked outside and ran around in

circles, squealing with excitement and saying, 'Great StarClan! Our camp is huge!' Then you stumbled out, Echopaw, and followed your sister and ran into Eveningstar. You both fell over in surprise and Eveningstar laughed. 'So it looks like you found your way out of the nursery,' he had said. You two just stared at him then turned tail and ran back to the nursery, where you found Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail, Eaglekit and Sparrowkit then. They were made apprentices two sunrises after that. Anyway, you started bragging to them about how you'd met Eveningstar, and became mad when they weren't impressed."

"Really? I don't remember that. I only remember thinking the camp looked huge, that's it," Whisperpaw laughed.

"How many moons after Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail were we born?" asked Echopaw, "because I never remember them being in the nursery."

"Around five moons later," meowed Sparktail, her whiskers twitching with amusement as she thought back on the memory.

They continued to walk, the sun slowly sinking toward the horizon, reflecting off the trees' leaves and making the forest look like it was on fire. Sooner than Echopaw thought, they had reached the stream. She had been too busy talking to notice that they had passed the Great Pine.

"Okay, we'll each collect enough for one bed; since there are three of us and three elders, we can each collect enough for one nest," meowed Sparktail.

"Sounds fair," nodded Echopaw, and she turned and padded to the banks of the stream, and began stripping off moss from the trunks of trees, where it wasn't as moist. She piled up a large amount and then called to her mother over her shoulder, "Should we collect some for the other dens?"

"Maybe for the apprentices' den, but not the others. During dawn and dusk patrols, the cats try and collect moss for the warriors' den and the nursery, and when it's not enough, they can each go to the stream themselves to get more," her mother replied.

Echopaw nodded and continued to collect extra moss for the apprentices' den.

After she'd collected enough, she balled it up, grabbed it in her jaws, and padded over to Sparktail and Whisperpaw, who were almost done as well. When the three of them had finished, they headed back toward the camp. The sun was nearly touching the horizon when they finally passed through the bramble bushes and entered the camp.

Echopaw and Whisperpaw headed toward the elders' den, while Sparktail turned to drop off her moss in the apprentices' den.

Echopaw stepped under the low-hanging pine branches of the entrance to the elders' den and saw Fogtail sleeping in the corner while Ferrettail and Spruceclaw were laughing. "And remember when Whirlheart got stuck in the Gathering that one night? She had thorns all in her fur!"

Echopaw stopped dead and shared a bewildered glance with Whisperpaw, and she knew she and her sister were thinking the same thing. *Whirlheart? The elders knew Whirlheart?*

Spruceclaw laughed. "That was just after she'd been made a warrior too! It seems like it was only yesterday!"

"Yes, well, she was distracted after that Gathering; it was very, very tense," Ferrettail added.

Spruceclaw nodded, then chuckled. "And remember when she asked you to be her mate?" he teased.

Ferrettail flattened his ears. "That doesn't have to do with her falling in the bush! And whatever. She was perfect for me anyway."

Echopaw glanced at Whisperpaw in surprise. *Whirlheart was Ferrettail's* mate*? Whirlheart had been a* DawnClan *warrior!*

"I know," meowed Spruceclaw. Then he turned and saw Whisperpaw and Echopaw standing there and meowed, "Oh, there you are! Thanks. You can just set it in the corner; we'll divide it up when Fogtail wakes up."

Echopaw nodded and followed her sister to the corner of the elders' den and dropped the moss. She licked out her mouth and swallowed to get the taste of moss out, then turned to Ferrettail and asked, "Whirlheart was your mate?"

Ferrettail nodded, suddenly staring at the ground sadly, his mood changing rapidly from the happy one it was moments ago.

"What happened to her?" breathed Whisperpaw.

Ferrettail shook his head, looking close to tears. Spruceclaw answered for him, "She died of greencough many seasons ago, along with their kit named Quailkit; he was only a quarter-moon old."

"You had a kit?" Echopaw asked Ferrettail. He slowly nodded. Echopaw felt so sorry for him. His mate *and* kit had died.

"Whirlheart is watching over you from StarClan," Whisperpaw promised.

Spruceclaw rested his tail on his friend's back and looked at the two apprentices, flicking his ears at the den entrance and signaling to them that they should leave.

Echopaw dipped her head and asked, "Do you still want that fresh-kill?"

"No, thank you though. We had some earlier, while you two were out collecting the moss."

Echopaw dipped her head and meowed to Ferrettail, "I bet you would have been a great father. Whirlheart was lucky to have you as a mate."

Then she turned and headed out of the den, Whisperpaw close behind. As they stepped outside, Echopaw saw the sky; it was glowing bright red now, and the sun was finally setting behind them. Echopaw turned and saw the sun, sinking into the horizon and burning up the sky as it did. The clouds were bright orange, glowing like fire.

"Wow," gasped Whisperpaw, and Echopaw nodded. Cats stopped

what they were doing and turned to watch the sunset. Echopaw turned around and saw Bronzepelt and Sagetail sitting while Raykit chased his tail in excitement.

Just then, Echopaw saw a flash of black and white fur. Echopaw craned her neck to see where it went, but it had disappeared behind Moonshine and Twigfoot. When she saw the pelt again, she saw piercing blue eyes staring up at the sky. It was Hailpaw! Echopaw got to her paws and padded over to him. "How was collecting the herbs with Yellowpaw and Goldheart?" she asked him as she sat down.

"It was actually really fun. I never get to be with Yellowpaw anymore, so this let me spend time with her," Hailpaw smiled. "Well? What did you do?"

"Um," Echopaw thought. "I'm sure you heard about Raykit catching the butterfly," she began.

"Yeah, I did. Cloverpaw told me. She said that he said that a voice in his head told him to jump and he landed with it under his paws, and he doesn't even remember how he did it."

"Yeah, that's what happened. Anyway, Whisperpaw and I went to bury it," meowed Echopaw, avoiding the part where the butterfly changed colors and showed them a vision. "Then we came back and were told we wouldn't have time for training. So, you got to be out of camp, exploring, while I had to stay in camp all day."

"Now who's stuck in camp?" Hailpaw teased.

Echopaw playfully pushed him over, but he let out a squeal. Then Echopaw remembered that he had a sprained paw. "Sorry!" she exclaimed and she helped him up back to his paws.

Hailpaw shook off and meowed, "It's fine. The walk really helped exercise my paw so it can heal faster, but if I land on it wrong, it hurts."

"Oh, sorry. I forgot."

"It's alright. Sometimes I did too. But I remembered the hard way."

They both laughed.

"Are you sleeping in the medicine cats' den still?" she asked him.

"Yeah," Hailpaw muttered. "But Goldheart said it'd be only a few more sunrises until I can move into the apprentices' den, but I won't be able to start training until he checks it and confirms that it's completely healed."

"Well, that's good. Hopefully it heals up fast."

"Yeah. And hedgehogs will fly," Hailpaw murmured sarcastically.

Echopaw looked back up at the sky and saw that the color was draining out of the sunset fast and night was approaching. She turned around and saw the moon climbing higher and higher into the night sky. It was nearly full! Tomorrow night would be when it was finally full and when the Gathering would be! Echopaw started feeling anxious. Who was Eveningstar taking with him this time? Would she and Whisperpaw go?

"What's gotten into you?" Hailpaw laughed. "You look like you have ants in your fur!"

She hardly processed what he'd just said. "I'm just excited about the Gathering tomorrow," she told him distractedly, her paws tingling with excitement.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot that it's tomorrow. Do you think Eveningstar will choose you?"

"I hope so!" Echopaw squealed, still gazing at the moon.

"Hailpaw, I think you should get to bed," meowed Moonshine, turning to him. "Remember Goldheart said that sleep is essential for healing."

Hailpaw yawned, "I know. I'll go there right now. That walk today exhausted me."

Moonshine licked his head, "Goodnight, my dear." Then she turned and walked toward the warriors' den with Twigfoot.

"Well, goodnight then, Echopaw," Hailpaw yawned.

"Goodnight; you'd better go right to bed. You look like you're about to fall asleep on your paws," Echopaw purred with amusement.

"I think I might. They feel like they're about to fall off."

Echopaw murmured her goodnights to Hailpaw then padded off to the apprentices' den herself. When she got there, she saw Whisperpaw talking to Cloverpaw. But talking was a bit of an understatement Echopaw realized as she saw that both apprentices' pelts were bristled and Cloverpaw's eyes narrowed in anger.

"I'm sorry, it's just I thought we might need someone to help calm down Raykit! And I thought two was enough to bury a butterfly!" Whisperpaw meowed angrily.

"Huh. Well it didn't sound like that. It *sounded* like you didn't want me with you," Cloverpaw growled.

"I didn't mean it like that," Whisperpaw insisted.

Cloverpaw muttered something Echopaw couldn't hear. Then she looked up at Echopaw and growled, "Come to tell me you don't want me here, like your sister?" she snarled.

"That is *not* what Whisperpaw said!" she exclaimed, sticking up for her sister. "I heard her. She was trying to *apologize*."

Cloverpaw grunted and bared her teeth at them both. Then she gathered up her moss and pushed it as far away from Echopaw and Whisperpaw's nests as possible. Echopaw shrugged at Whisperpaw, who looked back at her, sadness in her eyes. Echopaw knew how she felt; keeping the vision and prophecy a secret was hard enough without having their friend thinking they didn't want her around. It was hard to explain some things when the answer always had to do with the prophecy.

Echopaw sighed and curled up beside her sister. Eventually, Whisperpaw's slow, steady breathing let Echopaw know she was asleep, and Echopaw closed her eyes as well.

* * *

The next morning, Echopaw woke up to find that both Whisperpaw and Cloverpaw were awake and had already left the den. The sun had already risen and she guessed that the dawn patrol had already left. Echopaw sat up and stretched, then she stepped out of the apprentices' den and saw Whisperpaw sitting with Rustypelt, sharing a blackbird with him. Echopaw walked over to them and asked her sister, "Where are Gravelpelt and Bronzepelt? They promised to take us training today."

"Oh, they went with Meadowheart and Cloverpaw to the stream to get some moss for the apprentice's and warriors' dens. They left at dawn, so they should be back very soon," replied Rustypelt.

"Oh, okay," Echopaw nodded, and she sat down beside her sister and father and grabbed a vole from the fresh-kill pile for her meal.

"Are you excited for the Gathering tonight?" Rustypelt asked both his daughters.

Echopaw's heart leapt with joy. Her eyes glowed and her paws tingled with excitement. Then the light inside of her died as she realized she might not be chosen to go. After all, she *had* been punished for disobeying her mentor *and* her leader, for running away and ending up in NightClan territory, and for growling at Fogtail. She lowered her head and sighed.

"What's the matter?" asked Rustypelt, concern in his eyes.

"I might not get to go," she murmured.

"Why not?" asked Whisperpaw. Echopaw looked at her and narrowed her eyes in exasperation and annoyance. Whisperpaw looked away, flicking her ears away in embarrassment, and meowed, "Oh."

"Well," Rustypelt turned to Echopaw. "Eveningstar sounds like he's impressed in how seriously you took your punishment and how eager you were to prove you could start your training again. So, he might choose you," Rustypelt suggested hopefully.

"How do you know?" asked Echopaw, curious.

"Last night," meowed Rustypelt, "I went on the evening patrol, and Eveningstar was leading it. He told me, while we were heading toward the borders, that he was impressed at your progress. He also said you carried out your punishment well, and the elders, even Fogtail, said they were impressed at how well you were doing."

"Really?" Echopaw purred, embarrassed at her leader's comment about her. Her father's statement brought her spirits up again, and she flicked her tail across the ground as she closed her eyes, imagining herself going to the Gathering. She kneaded the ground and purred in delight.

"What about me?" asked Whisperpaw, flicking her ears in curiosity, "Did he say anything that suggests he may choose me to go to the Gathering?"

"He didn't say anything about you, but-" Rustypelt began.

Whisperpaw sighed and immediately looked downcast, and Echopaw felt her sister's pain. It wouldn't be nearly as fun if only she went to the Gathering and Whisperpaw didn't.

"I'm not finished yet," Rustypelt meowed, and Whisperpaw looked up at her father again. "He knows the bond between littermates; he knows you'll want to go together. He wouldn't choose one of you and not the other; I know Eveningstar. It'll be both of you or none."

Whisperpaw immediately looked happier at this, and purred with anticipation.

Rustypelt looked around and Echopaw saw Sunfur and Creekfall beckoning to Rustypelt over by the brambles. Rustypelt turned back to his daughters and meowed, "I think they want me on the hunting patrol. I'll see you two later." He got up and bounded over toward the two warriors and together they left the camp.

Not a heartbeat later, Bronzepelt, Gravelpelt, Meadowheart, and Cloverpaw stepped through the barrier with clumps of moss in their jaws. They each took some to the nursery, warriors' den,

apprentices' den, and leader's den; last night Echopaw had given the elders moss, so they didn't need more yet.

After taking his moss to Eveningstar's den, Bronzepelt padded over to Echopaw and Whisperpaw. "Sorry about the delay. We'll go out right away."

"Thanks!" exclaimed Whisperpaw.

Gravelpelt had walked up to them, too, and meowed, "Sorry, we are each training somewhere different today."

Echopaw looked at Whisperpaw and they both shrugged; they'd done this before. "Okay, sounds good," Echopaw told the warriors.

"Okay," Gravelpelt meowed, thinking. "Whisperpaw and I will head toward the DayClan border and train in the meadow, while you two can go around toward the Thunderpath and train in the forest there."

"Sounds good. The forest is definitely a better place to practice hunting than the meadow, since Echopaw needs to catch up on her hunting skills," replied Bronzepelt.

"And," Gravelpelt added, looking at Whisperpaw, "Since you've pretty much got the hunting techniques down, we can do some battle training in the meadow; it's nice and open and a perfect place for our occasion."

Both apprentices nodded at their mentors' ideas.

"See you later then," meowed Whisperpaw, and she followed Gravelpelt out of the camp.

"Bye!" she called after them. Then she turned to her mentor. "Okay. Should we go?" Echopaw felt excitement creeping up her legs, her paws itching to be out of camp again.

"Sure, let's go." Bronzepelt nodded and turned toward the bramble bushes.

Echopaw followed as her mentor turned this way and that, in and

around and through the forest. She recognized some parts, while others were unfamiliar. The leaf-fall trees were looking more bare and their leaves were falling from the high branches in the breeze. The red, orange, and yellow leaves rustled, causing the forest to sound like it was whispering. They leapt over fallen trees, moss covering their once-alive branches. Finally, Bronzepelt stopped.

"Here we are," he whispered. "Try and find a prey scent-trail. Do it like we did with the daisy. Be extra quiet and stay low, while making light steps. Think you can do it?"

Echopaw closed her eyes and nodded, and, when she opened them, she was ready. She saw Bronzepelt slipping away into a small oak bush to conceal himself as Echopaw focused on hunting. She took a deep but quiet breath then opened her mouth to taste where the nearest prey was hiding. She perked her ears and listened for the tiny heartbeat of prey, its tiny feet scuttling on the ground in search of food, but couldn't find anything.

Then a warm prey-scent filled her nose; she had found a vole. Her mouth watered and she crouched down, sitting as still as a rock, her silver and tan tabby fur hardly moving. Only the steady but subtle rising and falling of her flanks when she breathed would let any cat know she was alive.

Echopaw perked her ears, trying to pinpoint where the vole was. She followed its scent-trail toward a patch of tall grass. The scent was the strongest here, and she knew the vole was in the grass, searching for seeds. But where? Her bright blue eyes flicked across the scene, looking for a flash of dusky brown fur. She could hear it moving around on the ground, but she still couldn't find it.

Finally, a flash of brown went by through the grass, and Echopaw saw it sitting hunched over a grass seed, nibbling at its tiny meal. Echopaw was about to race over and catch it, but remembered her mentor's instructions and slowly and quietly crept forward. Her belly fur barely touched the ground as she stalked forward, and her tail dragged behind her. She flattened her ears against her head to hide herself better in the undergrowth, hoping the prey wouldn't see her gray and tan fur.

Then, as she crept forward, Echopaw stepped on a dead oak leaf, which made a crunching sound. The vole looked up, searching for the creature that had made the noise. It looked around, its large round eyes wide in fright. It started to turn around and slowly headed for the tall grass, but Echopaw was too quick. She sprang out from her hiding place and raced after the vole. The vole scampered around in panic, then it raced through the undergrowth, heading for its burrow. Echopaw sprinted, her claws furiously raking through the dirt, trying to find a good grip. She was gaining on the vole, but the vole was also gaining on its burrow. She jumped forward, her claws outstretched, ready to grasp her prey.

She landed awkwardly in the dirt, sending dust flying up around her. She had missed the vole by a mouse-length. She heard the vole's tiny feet still running, and listened as its footsteps faded away, disappearing into its burrow. Echopaw sat up and spat dirt from mouth and silently cursed the dead oak leaf she had stepped on. She shook off her pelt, dust flying everywhere. She turned as Bronzepelt bounded out from behind a tree; she had forgotten he had watched the whole thing.

"Well done! Even if you didn't end up catching it, your techniques were all great. You balanced out your weight, you kept your tail low, and-"

"Well I *would* have caught it if that stupid oak leaf hadn't been there," Echopaw scowled.

Bronzepelt shrugged. "Perhaps. But you can't blame that leaf; that catches *no* prey. Every cat makes mistakes, and they *learn* from them. That's what makes Goldheart such a great medicine cat. He's made as many mistakes as there are stars in the sky. And no, I'm not saying that Goldheart makes more mistakes than any cat, but he *does* make mistakes. He's learned what *to* do, and what *not* to do. If he hadn't have made any mistakes his whole life, then when he did make a mistake, he wouldn't know what to do with himself.

"My point is if *you* never make these mistakes, you'll never be prepared for unexpected things in life. Mistakes help you grow stronger." Bronzepelt sighed, "Echopaw, you have already learned from a lot of mistakes, like not running out into the forest at night,

especially if there is flooding."

Echopaw looked up and then muttered sarcastically, "What did I learn from this mistake, then? Oak leaves ruin everything?"

"No," meowed Bronzepelt sternly, "That you look where you are putting your paws while stalking your prey."

"Oh." Echopaw understood. "Alright. Should we try again in another part of the forest?"

"Sure," Bronzepelt nodded in satisfaction and lead her back toward the way they had come. Echopaw followed close behind. She looked up; the sun was nearing the horizon. She glanced around briefly in search of the full moon, but she couldn't see it.

Bronzepelt stopped and whispered, "Okay, let's try here. We'll split up. I'll go this way," he flicked his tail to the right, "and you go that way," he flicked his tail toward the left. "We'll meet back here."

Echopaw nodded and turned left, stalking through the ferns and berry bushes and other undergrowth. She kept her mouth open and her ears perked for any sign of a creature in the undergrowth. She saw two sparrows, but she hadn't been taught how to catch birds yet, so she left them alone. She'd only been taught that voles and mice feel your footsteps through the ground, and rabbits hear you while you think you're being completely silent. So, Bronzepelt suggested that when hunting voles and mice, step lightly; when hunting rabbits, focus on being silent rather than stepping lightly.

She continued to prowl through the forest, but found no other prey besides the two sparrows. She continued forward, almost ready to give up, when she heard a squeak on her left. She dropped back down into the hunting crouch and tried to find where the noise had come from. Then she saw it: a shrew. She'd seen them on the fresh-kill pile before, but she'd never been taught how to hunt them. It looked like a mouse and a vole mixed together. It behaved like mice and voles, so Echopaw guessed the stalking was the same.

She slowly padded forward, careful to look where she was putting her paws as well as stepping as lightly as she could. She weaved

through the grass, her ears flat against her head again. The shrew was oblivious to Echopaw; it had no idea she was there. Echopaw stopped and shifted into a pouncing position. She rocked her haunches back and forth, and sprang out at her prey. It tried to run, but Echopaw was on it before it could even take a pawstep. She clasped it between her claws and bit hard in its neck, swiftly ending its life.

Echopaw stepped back and stared at her first prey. She had caught something at last! Pride swelled in her chest as she took in the mouth-watering scent of her prey. She quickly thanked StarClan for its life, and that she'd have something to take home to the fresh-kill pile.

Echopaw looked up at the sky through the trees and saw the sun nearing the horizon, its rays reaching through the trees and touching Echopaw with its warmth. It warmed her all the way down to her bones, despite the chilling weather as dusk faded into night.

She looked down at the dead shrew by her paws and realized she had to meet Bronzepelt again. She leaned down to pick up her prey and felt yet another burst of pride as she carried it toward the setting sun to meet up with her mentor.

As she padded onward through the forest, she finally saw the full moon climbing higher and higher off the horizon. The Gathering would be at moonhigh, so her Clan would have to get going if they wanted to reach the Pointed Mountain on time. Echopaw picked up her pace; if she didn't get back to camp soon, Eveningstar might not choose her to go to the Gathering!

Going to the Gathering, catching my first prey! If Eveningstar chooses me to go with the Gathering patrol, today will turn out to be the greatest day I could have ever wanted!

Chapter 15

When Echopaw and Bronzepelt reached camp, Echopaw holding her shrew and Bronzepelt holding a mouse and a finch, Eveningstar was on the High-stone, and the Clan was gathered at the base of it.

"Okay, we should leave now, I bet most of the other Clans are already on their way; we don't want to be the Clan that shows up last, do we?"

"No!" the rest of the Clan shouted, and Echopaw saw Whisperpaw joining in the loudest.

"Okay, so I'll choose—" Eveningstar stopped as he saw Bronzepelt and Echopaw walking toward the High-stone. "Oh good! You're back!" He blinked warmly at the vole in Echopaw's jaws. "Congratulations on your first catch by the way Echopaw."

Echopaw blushed and beamed shyly as she nodded her thanks to Eveningstar.

Eveningstar shook his head as if clearing a thought. "Enough chit-chat, we've got a Gathering to get to. Echopaw, Bronzepelt, put your prey on the fresh-kill pile."

Echopaw followed her mentor away from the gathered cats to the fresh-kill pile. She raced ahead of him, hastily tossed the shrew on the fresh-kill pile, and ran back to the High-stone to sit next to her sister.

"Nice job on your first catch!" her sister meowed cheerfully as Echopaw reached her.

"Thanks," she purred. "The shrew was easy to catch; it didn't even notice me. You should have seen me try and catch a mouse; great StarClan they're fast!"

Whisperpaw purred with amusement then meowed, "So you didn't

catch it then?"

"No, I didn't. But it's alright, at least I brought home something!"

Whisperpaw nodded her agreement, then looked back up at their leader in excitement.

"Now it's time to choose a patrol. Time is wasting away and we must get going! Okay, I'll take Aspenleaf and Creekfall, Copperleaf, Twigfoot, Bronzepelt." He paused, glancing around the clearing. "Gravelpelt, Spruceclaw, then Echopaw and Whisperpaw."

"Great StarClan!" Echopaw squealed. "We get to go to the Gathering!"

"I can't believe it!" Whisperpaw squealed in return. Then they both started chasing each other in their excitement.

Eveningstar nodded in satisfaction then yowled to the Clan, "Cats on the Gathering patrol, we're leaving now! Let's go!"

Echopaw bounced up and was about ready to race out of camp, but was stopped by a voice behind her.

"You're not leaving without saying goodbye, are you?"

Echopaw turned around and saw Sparktail and Rustypelt sitting side by side. Echopaw raced over to them and heard Whisperpaw right behind her. Echopaw ran over to her mother and rubbed her face in her fur and meowed, "Goodnight, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight. Have fun, and be safe. Do exactly as Eveningstar and your mentors tell you," Rustypelt meowed.

"We know!" Whisperpaw replied.

Echopaw licked her father's shoulder and then followed her sister toward the bramble bushes and the rest of the patrol, but she was stopped again by another cat.

Hailpaw meowed, "Lucky furball! Anyway, be safe, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye!" Echopaw smiled, then raced out of camp after Whisperpaw.

Eveningstar yowled, "We need to run through at least our territory if we have any hope of making it there on time. Once we reach DayClan territory... well, we'll see then. And remember, stay within two fox-lengths of the border when we get there. We don't need a fight with DayClan."

Echopaw nodded eagerly and raced after her leader, Aspenleaf to her left, who wasn't even slowing down, despite that she had had a healing scar on her stomach still, or that she was going to have kits.

Bronzepelt was to Echopaw's right, and he panted, "Are you excited?"

"Are you kidding?" Echopaw purred excitedly through heavy breaths, heart racing.

Bronzepelt smiled and fell back to run with Gravelpelt and Copperleaf. Echopaw looked ahead once more and saw her sister running just in front of her. Echopaw picked up speed and finally reached her sister's side as they passed the Great Pine and neared the stream. Echopaw prepared for the jump and watched in amazement as Eveningstar jumped early; about two fox-lengths from the stream's banks. He cleared it perfectly, and continued to run. Twigfoot and Spruceclaw followed, gracefully landing beside their leader as Creekfall and Aspenleaf leapt up into the air and over the stream, too. Not a heartbeat later, Echopaw saw Whisperpaw leap, and Echopaw followed close behind her sister, springing off the ground and pushing off hard with her hind legs. As she landed, she heard Gravelpelt, Copperleaf, and Bronzepelt jumping right behind her. Once everyone was safely across, the three warriors behind Echopaw picked up speed and soon the patrol was one big group again, each cat matching each other's paces almost perfectly.

A weird feeling crept along Echopaw's spine as they reached the meadow. She was so close to DayClan territory, then they would be actually entering it! Butterflies filled her stomach as Eveningstar slowed down to a trot along the river's banks toward some stones sticking up out of the rushing water. The river was silver and white

in the moonlight, looking peaceful in the brisk, chilly night. Starlight made the stones glow silver, their smooth surfaces making them look like moons in a watery sky.

"Good thing we are crossing now and not the day after the rainstorm. The flooding would have made it nearly impossible to reach the Gathering," Copperleaf murmured to Spruceclaw, who nodded in agreement.

"Alright, we're crossing here. One at a time. I'll go first," Eveningstar meowed.

Echopaw looked sideways at Whisperpaw, her sister's eyes reflecting her own fear and anxiety, but eagerness and adventure filled them as well.

As all the cats but Echopaw, Whisperpaw, and Copperleaf crossed safely, Eveningstar called from across the river, "Whisperpaw, you next. Then Echopaw, you go. Copperleaf, once they're safely across, you'll go."

All three of them nodded and Whisperpaw walked forward and leapt to the first stone, her paws slipping. Echopaw closed her eyes, but when she heard no splash, she opened them to see her sister jumping from the last stone to the other bank.

Echopaw sighed in relief, but fear crept up on her again as she padded toward the river's banks to cross. She looked down at the currents, and a memory filled her mind: she was underwater, lashing out at the currents, struggling to hold her breath. No matter how much she kicked and fought, the water was still stronger. She felt helpless. Water was a dangerous enemy...

Echopaw jerked herself back into the present. She shook her head to clear away her fear; she couldn't let her Clanmates think she was afraid of water. She prepared to jump, rocking her haunches back and forth. The memory had faded, but was still lingering in her mind as she swallowed nervously and jumped to the first stone. Her paws slipped and she unsheathed her claws to try and find a grip. As she steadied herself, she took a deep breath and leapt to the next stone, the water making waves pass over the stones that lapped at

her paws, as if it was taunting her. She ignored the thought and sprung off the stone and onto the next one. Stone by stone, she crossed the river. When she'd safely made it to the other side, Copperleaf leapt across them, almost at a running speed. He made it look so easy.

Show-off, Echopaw thought as she turned and followed the patrol away from the river.

"I can't believe we're in DayClan's territory!" hissed Whisperpaw in Echopaw's ear. "It feels so strange. I feel like DayClan is going to jump out at us at any heartbeat!" Her sister's statement made her shiver, and she realized she felt the same way. She slowly nodded and sunk lower into the grass, feeling like she was being watched by enemies on all sides. Her heart pounded so loud that she thought it would jump out of her chest.

They padded onward, and Echopaw soon realized that they were heading toward the Thunderpath. She was about to ask why the were heading the wrong way from the Pointed Mountain, when she realized that DayClan had ordered the other Clans to stay within two fox-lengths of the border on nights of Gatherings, and staying by the Thunderpath would do that.

Eveningstar turned right as they reached the edge of the Thunderpath. Echopaw crept forward, so low that her belly fur dragged across the dirt as she stalked forward.

"Echopaw, there's no need to hide. There aren't as many monsters at night as there are in the day. And, DayClan made their promises about us being in their territory. Stick close and you'll be fine," Spruceclaw meowed.

"Yeah," agreed Creekfall, nodding, "Plus, DayClan will have probably already left on their way and are probably way further ahead of us."

Echopaw nodded, rose from the grass, then walked beside her sister. Although the warriors' statements had somewhat comforted Echopaw, the weird feeling of being watched, and worry of being on unfamiliar territory, still engulfed her, and she had to glance

around her in order to try and convince herself that nothing was actually watching them.

They continued onward, the moon climbing higher into the sky: halfway to moonhigh. Echopaw followed Creekfall and Aspenleaf, whose pelts brushed as they walked. Echopaw smiled and turned to her right to see Eveningstar, Twigfoot, and Spruceclaw walking side by side.

Then suddenly Spruceclaw stopped mid-step and whispered to Twigfoot and Eveningstar, "Do you smell that?"

Echopaw paused to sniff the air. A cat-scent filled the air, mixed with the smell of the Thunderpath. She turned and saw a patrol of cats crossing the Thunderpath many fox-lengths in front of them. In the lead was a white tom with ginger patches, and Echopaw guessed he was the Clan leader. Beside him was a mottled brown tabby tom. He was followed closely by a group of three apprentices. One was a long-haired white tom with a dark brown ear, dark brown striped tail, and a dark brown stripe on his face. The next one was a taller black tom with amber eyes; he pranced after his Clanmates, his nose and tail raised proudly. The last one was a pretty silver, black, and white tabby she-cat with deep, dark orange eyes. She glanced at Echopaw shyly but eagerly and followed the light brown tabby tom in front of her. They blinked at the DawnClan patrol eagerly; Echopaw guessed by their expressions that it was their first Gathering, and anticipated meeting them. Apprentices from another Clan! She reminded herself to find them later and meet them.

Behind them, the rest of their Gathering patrol reached the other side of the Thunderpath, gathering around their leader as he paused to meet Eveningstar.

Eveningstar dipped his head politely to the white tom with ginger patches and meowed, "Good evening, Orangestar; how's the prey running?" Echopaw glanced at Orangestar and remembered that he was the leader of DuskClan.

Orangestar dipped his head in return, "Fine enough. How about in DawnClan?"

"It's good, thanks," Eveningstar meowed curtly but politely. Then he turned toward his own Clan. "We'd better keep going."

The cats from DuskClan followed Orangestar away from the DawnClan cats and ran onward through the thin trees. Eveningstar padded after them, and the rest of the patrol followed him.

After a long, seemingly endless walk, which left Echopaw's feet aching, Bronzepelt meowed to her, "We're nearing the edge of DayClan's territory. Soon we'll be at the base of the Pointed Mountain; can you see it in the distance?"

Echopaw looked ahead and squinted her eyes, trying to see the jagged, steep slope of the Pointed Mountain in the darkness. Echopaw jumped in surprise when she saw it. Because they were now so much closer, the Pointed Mountain looked huge! She couldn't imagine what the mountains behind it would look like this close, but it was too dark to see them in the distance. Her heart leapt in excitement as they got closer and closer to its base.

Then Eveningstar announced, "Okay, we're here. Watch your step; this slope can be dangerous if you're not careful." He looked at Echopaw and Whisperpaw when he said this.

Because were the only ones in the DawnClan patrol who've never been to a Gathering before, Echopaw realized, looking up at the towering jagged rocky hill above her, surrounded by numerous others. She almost fell over from her dizziness. It was massive! She looked down again to see Orangestar and the other DuskClan cats climbing the slope, jumping swiftly from ledge to ledge, avoiding the protruding clumps of grasses and bushes. Echopaw swallowed nervously and followed her Clanmates up too. She leapt up and grabbed a ledge with her claws, hauling herself up. She left out a long breath. *Wow*, she thought, with tiredness already sweeping through her.

"Echopaw, you are taking the hard way," she heard Aspenleaf purr with amusement, "It's much less steep over here."

Echopaw groaned inwardly and jumped down from her ledge toward Aspenleaf's path. Echopaw looked up and saw that

Aspenleaf was right. This slope was hardly anything! She ran up it, passing Whisperpaw, Aspenleaf, and Creekfall on her way up. Hardly any bushes grew on this barren slope, but the few that did had strong roots digging into the rocky slope to steady the plant and protect it from falling during storms. These strong bushes and small trees helped provide a perfect grip to help Echopaw make her way up the mountain, especially when the rock underpaw wasn't steady.

Echopaw jumped up and over the topmost ledge of the mountain and stared in surprise at how many cats lay in the grassy and rocky meadow on top of it. Small shrubs grew along the edges, with sage bushes and a few flowers, which were wilting from the cooling weather as it approached leaf-bare. Echopaw recognized jasmine, lavender, and dandelions, fading, drying, and wilting beside her paws.

Echopaw glanced up and saw a large, scraggly dead tree on the highest point on the mountain. She realized that this must be the sacred Lightning Tree.

Echopaw turned as Whisperpaw jumped up behind her.

"Now, remember, you can talk to the cats of other Clans, but don't give away anything that could be used against us; don't show any signs of weakness," Gravelpelt meowed sternly. When both apprentices nodded, he meowed with a smile, "Now go have some fun. It is your first Gathering after all; make it memorable."

Echopaw nodded in excitement and walked side by side proudly with her sister. She recognized two scents, DuskClan and DayClan. Echopaw's fur prickled along her spine as she looked at the DayClan cats. They were really scrawny and ragged, and Echopaw realized they would be a threat for sure. She swallowed nervously and whispered to her sister, "Do you see the DayClan cats? This can't be good."

Whisperpaw nodded, "Yes. But have you noticed? NightClan isn't even here yet."

"Well, they are the farthest from the Pointed Mountain," Echopaw

pointed out.

"I suppose so. Do you want to go over there and sit with Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt? We'd get to know some of the warriors then," Whisperpaw nodded toward where their mentors were sitting with a group of DuskClan and DayClan cats.

"Sure!" Echopaw meowed enthusiastically and trotted over to sit by her mentor.

"Oh, yes, I remember that—" Bronzepelt cut off his sentence as he saw the two young cats approaching him. He was sitting with a dark ginger she-cat with white paws and underbelly from DuskClan and a white tom with pale yellow eyes also from DuskClan. On his other side was a long-haired reddish brown tom from DayClan. His pelt was a bit darker than a fox, and he looked just as strong as one, despite his scrawniness.

Bronzepelt continued, "Oh, this is my apprentice, Echopaw, and her sister, Whisperpaw."

Echopaw dipped her head nervously to the warriors and sat down beside her sister and her mentor, trying not to look too intimidated.

"I remember, Eveningstar announced that they'd been apprenticed at the last Gathering," meowed the dark ginger she-cat thoughtfully.

"Yes, he did. Echopaw, Whisperpaw," Bronzepelt meowed, nodding to the reddish brown DayClan tom who was eyeing them with a look that Echopaw did not like at all. "This is Burningwood. And over there," he motioned to the dark ginger she-cat from DuskClan, "is Gingerfur. And," he motioned to the white tom with pale yellow eyes from DuskClan, "this is Blizzardclaw."

The warriors nodded curtly and Echopaw dipped her head fearfully in return. She didn't like them all that much; they were too stern looking, and they made her feel so small and insignificant, especially the two broad, muscular toms.

Echopaw turned to Bronzepelt. "Um, we... Whisperpaw and I are going to meet some of the apprentices now." She avoided the eyes

of the other cats.

"Alright, see you later then," Bronzepelt meowed, turning back to the other warriors.

Echopaw let out a long breath of relief once they were out of the warriors' views. She looked around and saw the three DuskClan apprentices they'd seen earlier crossing the Thunderpath. Echopaw padded over to them, Whisperpaw close behind.

"Hello, um, I'm Echopaw," Echopaw meowed shyly, "And this is my sister, Whisperpaw."

"Hi," meowed the black tom curtly with his eyes narrowed.

"Hello, I'm Snowpaw," meowed the silver, white, and black tabby she-cat. She sounded much friendlier than the older apprentice. "This is Pantherpaw," she meowed, flicking her tail at the sleek black apprentice. Then she flicked her tail to her right at the long-haired white tom with dark brown stripes on his tail and a dark brown stripe on his face. "This is Raccoonpaw."

"Hi!" meowed Raccoonpaw excitedly. "So you're from DawnClan?"

"Yep," Echopaw stuck her chest out proudly. "We are."

"How long have you been training?" Whisperpaw asked the three DuskClan apprentices.

"Oh, just over two moons," answered Snowpaw.

"What about you?" challenged Pantherpaw.

"Just about three moons," countered Echopaw.

"Actually," Pantherpaw meowed indignantly. "I've been training for nearly four moons."

"Are any of your mentors Gingerfur or Blizzardclaw? We just met them," asked Whisperpaw.

"Why do you care?" growled Pantherpaw, flattening his ears in

suspicion.

"She's just curious, Pantherpaw. Calm your fur," Snowpaw rolled her eyes. "Yes, my mentor is Gingerfur. But see that light brown tabby tom over there with Orangestar?" Echopaw looked across the clearing and saw the tom she'd seen walking with Orangestar: the mottled brown tabby tom. Echopaw nodded.

"Well, his name is Falconflight; he's Pantherpaw's mentor and the deputy."

"Lucky furball!" meowed Raccoonpaw playfully, nudging Pantherpaw on the side, obviously trying to lighten his mood. "I wish I had the deputy as my mentor!"

"Yes, it is quite great," Pantherpaw boasted. Echopaw snorted, but Pantherpaw didn't notice.

"Have you met any other apprentices? Like from DayClan or NightClan?" Echopaw asked the three DuskClan apprentices.

"No," meowed Snowpaw, her eyes glittering with eagerness.

"Well, I see some DayClan apprentices over across the clearing; I'm going to go say hi," Whisperpaw declared, getting to her paws. At that same moment, Echopaw saw Cliffpaw, the friendly NightClan apprentice she'd met when she'd ended up in NightClan territory.

"You go, I'm going over that way," she told her sister, flicking her tail at the NightClan cat.

Whisperpaw shrugged and meowed, "I'll see you later then," and dashed across the clearing to two DayClan apprentices: a pretty gray-brown, black-striped tabby she-cat and a handsome tan-colored tom with thick black stripes. They looked like brother and sister.

Echopaw watched her sister go, shaking her head. What was she doing? They were from DayClan; the Clan that was causing all the trouble!

Echopaw sighed. Worry for her sister crept up her spine, and she

was about to go over there with her just to look out for her. But when Echopaw looked back, she could no longer she her sister or the DayClan apprentices; they were hidden behind a large crowd of DuskClan and DawnClan cats.

Echopaw's heart skipped a beat, but she realized that Whisperpaw would be fine. This was a Gathering; no cat would fight and break the sacred truce, not even two DayClan apprentices.

Chapter 16

"Echopaw!" Cliffpaw purred.

"Hello, Cliffpaw." Echopaw meowed in return as she reached the NightClan apprentice. To her disappointment, Cliffpaw was sitting with Pebblepaw and two other older NightClan apprentices: one was a dark brown tabby tom with a white underbelly and pale green eyes. The other was also a dark brown tabby tom, but he had a light brown underbelly, and white flecks on his face. He, like the other tom, had pale green eyes. They were definitely brothers. Echopaw cautiously padded up to them, and to her relief, Cliffpaw smiled when she saw her.

"How was it when you got home? I'm surprised your Clanmates didn't banish you from DawnClan!" Pebblepaw taunted, and the two older apprentice brothers laughed mockingly. Echopaw was reminded again about how much she disliked the white- and black-patched she-cat.

"Oh, stop it, you three," Cliffpaw muttered to her Clanmates, sounding annoyed. Echopaw looked at Cliffpaw and blinked, thanking her for sticking up for her. But Cliffpaw just meowed, "Oh, this is—" about ready to introduce Echopaw to her Clanmates, but was cut off by the tom with the white underbelly.

"We know! Pebblepaw told us. This is *Echopaw*, the cat we so *kindly* saved from the river," he sneered.

Of course Pebblepaw told them! Echopaw thought bitterly. She didn't like the way the tom annunciated 'kindly'. It had an air of foreboding with it.

"Fine, you three can gossip about nonsense. Come on Echopaw, let's find somewhere else," Cliffpaw meowed.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Echopaw warned Cliffpaw as she padded away, "They'll probably tease you and call you disloyal

for sticking up for me. They may think I'm your new best friend, then—"

"Oh, come on, Echopaw," Cliffpaw flicked her tail, signaling that the conversation was done. "By the way, those two toms were Duckpaw and Goosepaw, you remember me telling you about them, right?"

Echopaw nodded, "Yes. But which one is which? They look really similar."

"Oh, yes they do," Cliffpaw nodded. "Well, the one with the white underbelly is Goosepaw, and the one with the light brown underbelly and white flecks is Duckpaw."

"Oh, okay," Echopaw nodded, searching for something else to talk about.

"What did you do today?" Cliffpaw asked, and Echopaw was spared having to think of a conversation-starter.

Echopaw thought back to the events of earlier that day. Catching the shrew felt like a lifetime ago. Pride filled her chest as she meowed, "I caught my first prey today."

"Congratulations!" Cliffpaw meowed. "Today, I scented a fox in our territory and, with a few warriors, we chased it out," she declared proudly.

Echopaw wondered if the fox Cliffpaw had chased out was the same fox her and Bronzepelt had seen not even a half-moon ago while training in the meadow. Echopaw decided to tell her mentor and see what he thought.

Echopaw glanced around the clearing and saw Aspenleaf announcing something proudly to Gingerfur, the DuskClan warrior. Echopaw guessed she was telling her about her having kits. Echopaw purred in amusement and turned to the left to see the group of DayClan apprentices Whisperpaw had gone to sit with earlier, but her sister wasn't with them. Worry filled the pit of her stomach again, and she decided it was time to find Whisperpaw. "Bye, Cliffpaw. It was nice to talk to you again, but I've got to go

find my sister," Echopaw meowed as she trotted away.

"Oh, okay. Bye, Echopaw," Cliffpaw meowed, then she turned and padded away.

Echopaw reached the DayClan apprentices and asked them, "Have you seen my sister? She's a silver tabby, and she has brown eyes."

The gray-brown she-cat with black stripes she'd seen earlier answered. "I don't know. She disappeared a while ago, along with my brother, Bumblepaw. I think they went to meet other cats, but..." She sounded worried.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll be fine." Echopaw sighed in relief. It didn't sound like her sister was in trouble. "They probably—" she started, but was cut off.

"I know they'll be fine," snapped the DayClan apprentice.

"Then why are you so worried?" Echopaw retorted.

The apprentice ignored her and instead asked, "What's your name?"

"Echopaw. But why—"

"Mine's Songpaw."

"Okay, but you still haven't answered my—"

"I don't know where your sister is, alright?" Songpaw snapped again, in a tone that said, *we don't want you here, so go away.*

"Fine," Echopaw muttered bitterly, and she walked away. *Great StarClan! DayClan cats are so mean!* she thought as she stalked away back toward her mentor grumpily.

"Are you alright?" Bronzepelt asked as she sat down grumpily next to him.

"DayClan cats are so rude!" Echopaw growled.

"Shhh!" Bronzepelt hissed, but it was too late; Burningwood had

heard her. He stalked forward toward them, and Echopaw shrunk in toward Bronzepelt for protection.

"What?" Burningwood growled.

"I-I just m-met Songpaw, a-and—" Echopaw stammered, trying to find the right words.

Burningwood seemed to have forgotten they were there and muttered, "I thought I told her to act nice and not give away anything about our..." and then he stalked away. Echopaw stared after him in relief, hardly picking up on what the DayClan warrior had said.

"That was close. DayClan is already upset as it is. We don't need to add fuel to their flame," Bronzepelt growled as he stared after Burningwood with narrowed eyes. He seemed to have picked up on the meaning of what Burningwood had said.

Echopaw nodded. "Is Burningwood Songpaw's mentor?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, let's hope he takes care of her!" Echopaw growled.

Bronzepelt purred in amusement.

"Oh, have you seen Whisperpaw?" Echopaw asked. "I haven't seen her since she went to talk to some DayClan apprentices."

"Maybe they dragged her to their camp and took her as a prisoner," Bronzepelt suggested playfully, but Echopaw just glared at him. "Um, no. I haven't. But it's nearly moonhigh and the Gathering is about to start, so we'd better go sit down."

"Alright, she'll probably show up then," Echopaw meowed hopefully, and followed her mentor to sit over by Spruceclaw, Gravelpelt, Copperleaf, Creekfall, and Aspenleaf. Echopaw noticed that a few DayClan cats glanced nervously at Aspenleaf when they saw her. Echopaw remembered that DayClan had given Aspenleaf her near fatal wound. Creekfall glared at them and Echopaw also remembered that he'd promised to shred the fur off the cats that

had hurt Aspenleaf.

Echopaw sat down next to Aspenleaf and meowed in her ear, "Are any of them the ones who attacked you?"

Aspenleaf shook her head. "The one who actually gave me the wound isn't here. His name is Cougarfang. But that she-cat and tom over there," she flicked her ears toward a white she-cat with pale blue eyes and a dusky brown tabby tom with blue-green eyes, "were on the patrol that attacked ours. The she-cat is named Frostwhisker and the tom's name is Weedfoot."

Echopaw shivered, "Wow, we'll remember to look out for them then."

She looked at the Lightning Tree and saw Eveningstar leaping up to one of its branches, sitting beside Orangestar. On the other side sat Beechstar, the pale ginger tom Echopaw had seen when she'd washed up in NightClan's territory. A few heartbeats later, a white she-cat with sparse black patches, a black-tipped tail, and black ears clawed up the tree to join the other Clan leaders. She was really strong and swift, despite her scrawniness and the fact that her ribs showed through her fur. A silence rushed over the clearing, and the air was suddenly buzzing with fear and worry.

Echopaw gulped, heart pounding. The white she-cat sat next to Beechstar commandingly and swept her gaze across the clearing, as if challenging any cat to question her abilities. At that moment, Echopaw realized it was Rainstar, the leader of DayClan. Echopaw lowered herself to the ground as the DayClan leader's cold, icy-blue eyes raked over her. She swallowed nervously, and noticed that even Bronzepelt flattened his ears in surprise and fright. Echopaw felt as if she'd done something wrong, but couldn't remember what; she felt weak and helpless under her icy glare.

Rainstar lowered her gaze and looked at the other Clan leaders calmly, but the tension in the clearing still hung in the air. Echopaw watched as Rainstar glanced down at a brown tabby tom with a reddish brown underbelly. They nodded slightly at one another, and Echopaw felt chills racing down her back, causing her neck fur to rise.

"Who is that sitting below Rainstar on the roots of the Lightning Tree?" Echopaw whispered in her mentor's ear.

"That's Heatpool, the deputy of DayClan," Bronzepelt whispered back. "The deputies sit below the leaders during Gatherings. See, over there is Twigfoot, and next to him is the deputy of NightClan, Mapleleaf. And, next to Heatpool is Falconflight, the deputy of DuskClan."

Echopaw nodded in understanding and scanned the clearing again. Her heart leapt in relief when she saw Whisperpaw was sitting next to Gravelpelt a few fox-lengths to the left of her.

Echopaw looked up at the leaders once more and watched as Eveningstar motioned to Beechstar, inviting him to speak first. Beechstar nodded his thanks to Eveningstar and stood up to address the Clans. But, before he could speak, however, a voice growled, "I will speak first."

Echopaw gaped at Rainstar. How dare she? Echopaw's claws dug into the dirt, anger making her shiver. Rainstar smiled mockingly, her icy blue eyes taunting the other Clan leaders as she wrapped her tail neatly around her paws. She licked her paw, as if thinking. Echopaw could see that Orangestar was becoming more impatient by the heartbeat as Rainstar continued to groom herself. An eerie silence swept over the clearing, and no cat made any sound. It was so quiet that Echopaw could hear the distant roaring of the Thunderpath.

"If you're not going to speak, let Beechstar, or any other one of us," hissed Orangestar. Clearly, no one, except maybe DayClan, was happy with Rainstar.

Rainstar calmly looked up at Orangestar, her blue eyes full of fake concern. "I am going to speak." The icy calm of her voice made Echopaw's fur tingle with anticipation and foreboding. She was taunting the other leaders on purpose, and Echopaw knew it was not right.

Before Orangestar could retort, Beechstar meowed sternly, "This is the night of the full moon. Don't upset StarClan, we don't want to

break the sacred truce."

Rainstar shook her head, as if she was disappointed, "No, we do not. Right Orangestar?" she added mockingly.

Orangestar was puffing up, his tail nearly twice its usual size and his claws unsheathed.

Rainstar narrowed her eyes and kept her tail wrapped around her paws.

"Just speak already," Orangestar snarled, claws unsheathing.

Just then a shadow fell over the clearing. Echopaw's heart skipped a beat; she jerked her head up and saw a large, dark cloud covering the moon from her view. Gasps came from cats all around her, especially from DuskClan.

Rainstar shook her head and growled, "Now look what you've done, Orangestar. If you hadn't yelled like that, we wouldn't be sitting here in the shadows."

"If you would have started talking sooner, we'd be almost done announcing our news, and the shadow would never be here in the first place!" Orangestar retorted.

Every cat held their breath as Rainstar spoke again. "Well, it's done, Orangestar."

Echopaw glanced around the clearing. Besides the DayClan cats, all the cats looked up at the leaders with confused and scared looks in their eyes. Echopaw looked back up to see Rainstar straightening up as she prepared to speak. Echopaw glared up at the DayClan leader, hating every hair on her pelt.

"Back to the announcements. I'm sure you all remember that rain storm a half-moon ago." She paused, lashing her tail. "Well, how do you think it would feel to be on open moorland? It's all downhill! Our territory was flooded. We have no deep roots of trees to help stabilize our land!" Rainstar was hissing and shouting now, and Echopaw cowered in surprise. "It caused mudslides! Five cats were killed just from one mudslide alone: two kits, an elder, and two

apprentices! Then, while you were all happily enjoying the sun, we couldn't find any prey to feed the other remaining kits and a few of them died!"

"How do you know we were 'happily enjoying the sun', as you say? You know, we all suffered too!" yowled a voice to Echopaw's right, and Echopaw recognized the NightClan warrior, Robintail. There was a mutter of agreement around them as cats took in Robintail's statement.

Echopaw glanced up again and was horrified to see Rainstar glaring down at Robintail, looking ready to attack. "I was under the impression that *I* was speaking," she growled, menacingly calm. She sat taller, as if she was flaunting her power over them at that moment, and continued, "What I'm demanding is that you allow DayClan to hunt in your territories while we recover."

Every cat looked at each other in disbelief. An uproar of protests filled the air, each cat yowling furiously. Beside Echopaw, Bronzepelt was hollering insults up at Rainstar, who sat rigid, her white and black fur bristling. Echopaw glanced up nervously at Eveningstar, hoping he'd hold his ground and stand up to the DayClan leader.

Orangestar was the first to answer. "Are you out of your mind?" he growled, baring his teeth and lashing his tail back and forth. "DuskClan will never allow DayClan onto its territory!" The DuskClan cats around Echopaw shouted their agreement with their leader.

Rainstar looked furious, but kept her voice calm as she replied, "No need to get hostile. It was only a friendly request."

Echopaw heard Creekfall snort in disbelief, and Echopaw couldn't blame him; Rainstar's demand for the other Clans' territories was anything but friendly.

Eveningstar glanced around the clearing and then looked at Rainstar with his eyes narrowed, "DawnClan will not allow DayClan on its territory either. The Clans have always been able to support themselves on the territory they have now. Why would that

change? It was just one rain storm."

Murmurs of approval rippled throughout the clearing.

Yeah, Echopaw thought angrily, tail lashing. It was just rain! *She's just trying to get more control over us!*

Rainstar wasn't pleased by the reaction. She stood up and faced the other three leaders. "Our territory was destroyed! Our kits have died, and more will follow if we can't find food for them! What kind of warriors are you? You'd let a helpless kit die because of something out of its control?" she roared, claws digging deep into the branch she was balancing on.

Beechstar looked uncomfortable and scared as he watched Rainstar yell, and looked hopelessly around the clearing. He closed his eyes and sighed. Then, without opening them, he muttered, "You may hunt in NightClan's territory, Rainstar. I cannot let helpless kits die from hunger if I can help it."

Gasps of shock came from every cat around the clearing, especially from NightClan. Echopaw heard a yowl come from across the clearing, and saw the NightClan deputy, Mapleleaf, staring in horror at his leader. "How could you, Beechstar? DayClan should not—" He was cut off by a hard stare from Beechstar, but his tail still lashed angrily behind him.

Beechstar continued, turning to Rainstar. "But only under this condition will you be allowed to hunt on our territory: you must be supervised. My Clan needs fresh-kill just as much as yours, and I expect that prey will start returning to your territory soon; the rain storm was a half-moon ago."

Rainstar dipped her head in what seemed to be gratefulness, but Echopaw caught a glimmer of mischief and evil satisfaction in her eyes, which caused and icy claw to rake down Echopaw's spine. But the next moment it was gone and she meowed, "Of course, Beechstar. We will respect your Clan's needs as well. We just want our Clan to grow healthy and strong again."

Beechstar dipped his head. He turned to Eveningstar and asked, "Do

you want to announce your news now?"

Eveningstar met his eyes stiffly and replied, "No, you can."

Beechstar looked offended for a split second, but quickly got over it and meowed, "Fine," then turned to the whole clearing. "StarClan has blessed our nursery this past moon. One of our queens, Brownear, had three beautiful, healthy kits. We congratulate her." Beechstar paused."And, one of our apprentices, Cliffpaw, scented a fox in our territory and we drove it out." Echopaw looked across the clearing and found the small pale ginger she-cat sitting up tall and proud, and Echopaw felt happy for her. Beechstar continued, narrowing his eyes at Eveningstar. "Finally, this past moon we rescued a DawnClan apprentice after she washed up on the riverbank in our territory, and gave her food, shelter, and healed her injuries for her. In return, we'd like DawnClan to repay us, for they are in our debt."

Echopaw froze in shock. She shrunk toward the ground as she was reminded in front of all four Clans that she'd run away and fallen into the river. Cats from DayClan and DuskClan glanced at the DawnClan cats curiously; obviously they'd never heard this story. But the NightClan cats mockingly stared at Echopaw, and Echopaw noticed Pebblepaw, Duckpaw, and Goosepaw glaring at her with twisted smiles. Echopaw felt their gazes burning holes through her pelt, and she sunk lower toward the ground. Guilt and embarrassment radiated from her pelt, and her ears burned with shame. Echopaw looked around the clearing and saw Cliffpaw staring at her paws, and Echopaw guessed that she had known that this would happen. Echopaw looked away from the NightClan apprentice, not wanting anything to do with her anymore. Echopaw's Clanmates had been right: NightClan had just been kind to her because they'd want to get payment in return to benefit themselves. Echopaw flattened her ears and stared guiltily at her paws. Now she wished that Eveningstar had never chosen her to go to the Gathering.

Echopaw looked up nervously at her mentor, preparing to see him with a look that said, I told you so. But when Echopaw met his eyes, they were full of sympathy. "I'm sorry," she murmured, feeling the waves of guilt washing over her once again.

Eveningstar looked uncomfortable as he asked, "What would the payment be?"

Beechstar looked around the clearing and then turned back to Eveningstar, "I have discussed this with my warriors, and we have decided that we'd like some catmint, juniper berries, and marigold to prepare us for the upcoming leaf-bare."

Eveningstar narrowed his eyes, and Echopaw could see the fury hidden in the brown depths. "And just how much will you be needing?"

"Oh, we won't take all of it," Beechstar replied lightly, licking his paw and looking pleased with himself. "We just need to have the right herbs to treat illnesses in leaf-bare."

"And what about my Clan?" hissed Eveningstar, his tail lashing.

"Well, you do owe us something for saving your apprentice. We could have left her there on the riverbank. She very well could have died if it weren't for us."

There was a silence in which Echopaw was sure Eveningstar was silently vowing to punish her, and Echopaw felt her throat dry with guilt. Her eyes misted. She'd let her whole Clan down.

Eveningstar flattened his ears and meowed stiffly, "Fine. A patrol will meet you by the Thunderpath tomorrow at dawn to give you the herbs."

"Sounds good," meowed Beechstar cheerfully. "Would you like to speak next?"

Eveningstar ignored him and shouldered his way past, pushing against the NightClan leader as he did. Then he raised his voice so all the cats could hear him. "We also saw a fox by the river. Echopaw and Bronzepelt saw it, and we thank them for warning DawnClan."

Echopaw saw her Clanmates giving her warm, approving looks, and she looked up at her leader, thankful that he hadn't taken his anger at Beechstar out on her. Echopaw ignored the mocking stares from

NightClan, then sat taller. Bronzepelt blinked encouragement at her. She smiled back weakly.

Eveningstar continued, "One of our warriors found out she was having kits a few sunrises ago. Aspenleaf will soon be joining the other queens in the nursery."

Warm looks of congratulations came from cats around Aspenleaf, and she looked proud and happy. Creekfall licked his mate's ear in encouragement while he purred loudly.

"Also, two of our new apprentices are here: Echopaw and Whisperpaw."

Echopaw forced her chest outward and pretended to look proud like Whisperpaw was while all the Clans looked at her yet again. The clearing echoed with their names for a few heartbeats, and Echopaw was glad when it was over.

"That's all I have," Eveningstar finished, then stepped back to sit on the branch again.

Orangestar stepped forward and meowed, "Now that NightClan has agreed to let DayClan on their territory, and DuskClan and DawnClan have not, how is DayClan going to get there? You don't share a border with NightClan, Rainstar."

Rainstar's blue eyes filled of forced concern. "I would have thought you'd let us walk along the edge of your territories if we needed to. After all, we let the other Clans walk through ours during the nights of Gatherings."

"That's different," meowed Eveningstar. "StarClan decreed that all four Clans attend Gatherings. They did not say the same about hunting in other Clans' territories."

Rainstar nodded solemnly and growled, "I see. I guess we'll just walk on the Thunderpath."

"Good," grunted Orangestar. "I have nothing important to report except that we have scented Twolegs on our territory, but it's nothing serious. We've always had to deal with Twolegs. Other than

that, prey is running well." He stepped back and asked, "Anything else to add?"

Eveningstar and Beechstar shook their heads, but Rainstar stepped forward.

"One thing," the DayClan leader meowed, her icy-blue eyes narrowed in warning, "You have denied us rights to hunt in your territories now. But that doesn't mean we won't do nothing to help our starving kits." With that, she jumped off the Lightning Tree and immediately started heading down the Pointed Mountain with her Clan following her.

Echopaw shuddered at Rainstar's last words. Foreboding filled the pit of her stomach.

Echopaw shook the thoughts away and looked around for Eveningstar. She saw him talking in a hushed voice to Twigfoot; both toms were shaking their heads and looking angered. Bronzepelt and Spruceclaw were saying their goodbyes to two DuskClan warriors. "May StarClan light your path," they said in return. Aspenleaf was nodding something to Gingerfur, the DuskClan she-cat, with Creekfall at her side.

Echopaw looked around for her sister. *Where is she? We're leaving soon.*

Finally she saw her, standing with one of the DayClan apprentices she'd seen her sister talking with earlier, Songpaw's brother, Bumblepaw. Whisperpaw was nodding at the young tom. Whisperpaw added something to him, and then she started walking toward the DawnClan patrol. The DayClan apprentice watched her go, then turned tail and ran after his Clanmates, who had already disappeared into the bushes.

Echopaw watched her sister, who was already heading down the slope of the mountain. Echopaw looked over around the clearing to see Snowpaw, the DuskClan apprentice, waving her tail at Echopaw in goodbye. Her two Clanmates, Pantherpaw and Raccoonpaw, were racing ahead to follow Gingerfur and Falconflight, along with the rest of their Clanmates. Echopaw smiled and flicked her tail in

return to the pretty silver and white she-cat. Her amber eyes glowed, then she turned and darted away through the bushes and followed her Clanmates. Echopaw got to her paws and started following her own Clanmates down the slope, but a flash of sand-colored fur caught her eye and stopped her. She turned to see Cliffpaw slowly walking toward her. Echopaw's neck fur rose.

Cliffpaw looked at her with sadness in her eyes as she meowed, "Echopaw, I'm so sorry. I know how important herbs are; Icepaw is my sister, and she's the apprentice medicine cat."

Echopaw narrowed her eyes coldly, "You could have at least told me Beechstar was going to request that," she muttered bitterly. "I was shamed in front of all the Clans!"

Cliffpaw's eyes widened. "I didn't know! I'm an apprentice! Beechstar would only discuss what he's announcing at the Gathering with his deputy and senior warriors." Echopaw narrowed her eyes. It made sense, but why should she believe a cat from another Clan? "Echopaw, I swear to StarClan I did not know."

Echopaw looked into Cliffpaw's pale blue eyes and saw sadness and sympathy glittering across them. Echopaw sighed and replied, "Okay, I believe you." Cliffpaw's eyes brightened, but when Echopaw continued, they became dull again. "But that doesn't mean we can still be friends." Then seeing Cliffpaw's face, she quickly added, "Be logical, Cliffpaw. We're from different Clans!"

"I know," Cliffpaw sighed, her light ginger fur sagging on her shoulders.

Echopaw heard Bronzepelt calling her name, and she replied, "I'm coming!" Then she turned to Cliffpaw and meowed, "I'll see you later then." Cliffpaw nodded sadly, murmured goodbye, then walked across the clearing to where the NightClan patrol had disappeared.

Echopaw padded across the clearing as well, following the scent of her Clanmates. She looked up at the sky and saw the glittering spirits of StarClan watching over her; she'd need their help in the rough days to come. Not only was the prophecy unfolding, but now

DayClan was becoming more of a problem too.

Echopaw gathered up her courage and thought, *Let DayClan come! We'll be ready when they do!* A shooting star passed over Echopaw's head and she knew that StarClan was with her; they always would be. *And when the danger does come and the prophecy is fulfilled, I'll have the spirits of StarClan on my side! DawnClan will survive!*

Hope filled Echopaw's heart as she picked up speed and raced after her Clanmates toward DawnClan territory once more, ready for whatever lay out there in the darkness of the night.

End of Book 1

The story continues in Book 2: Lurking Evil

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